Le Destroy: Japanese Avantgardism and the West in the 20th Century

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Introduction

Creativity has always been one of the most significant motivators in my life. When given the option, I always choose the project that gives me the most creative leeway, and when not given the option, I find ways to add creative elements. Along with creativity, a common theme throughout my childhood has been the drive to attempt to go above and beyond what is required for an assignment.

When I was in the third grade my teacher, Ms. Goetz, had the class read the book *Jack and the Beanstalk* by Joseph Jacobs. After reading the novel, our assignment was to create a project based on what we had read. The direction given by the teacher was to glue dried beans to a sheet of paper; however this was not the direction I went in. The idea that I came up with for this project was to create a three-dimensional beanstalk made out of paper that would rise out of the paper and into the clouds. This was unfortunately not what was presented at the end. While my ideas for this project were ambitious, my small third grade body did not yet have the skills necessary to complete a project of this size and ambition. Later in the year, our third grade class had a breakfast share to show off all the work we completed that semester to parents and other teachers. On one of the tables was all of the completed *Jack and the Beanstalk* projects, with all of

them but mine present. Instead of settling on what everyone else in my class was doing, I was so adamant about breaking the boundaries of our third grade project that I ended up with nothing.

A similar situation occurred during preschool. Our assignment was to draw a picture of a thunderbird. Yet again, when parents showed up to see the work of the students, all but mine were present. My drawing was only the outline of the bird that was given for us to fill in. When asked by my parents about why my drawing was blank, the teacher of the preschool explained to my parents that when I was unable to pull off my original idea for the project, I had exclaimed that my creative vision for the project was a bare image dubbed “Naked Thunderbird”.

Even my Literature Review almost suffered the same fate as the last two examples. Starting my JRPS, the topic that I was intending to explore was “What is Avant-Garde fashion and what was its effect on popular culture?” This topic ended up being way too broad, covering everything in extreme depth from Renaissance fashion, art history, early 20th-century fashion, and ancient Japan, to the etymology of Avant-Garde, about 20 Avant-Garde designers, and the effect that fast fashion has had on the modern world. Due to the fact that I was intending to go into great depth about each topic, I would predict that a literature review of this size would have to be at least 500 pages, with dozens of

major sources having to be analysed and then synthesised in the timeframe of a few months. Thankfully, I was able to narrow my topic down to a more reasonable size, while still being able to address a significant amount of what I was intending to write about originally.

Fashion has always been a major interest in my life. Starting out, I tended to gravitate towards clothing that I thought conveyed a certain social standing, modeling myself after what I saw other people view as cool or popular. Over time, I expanded my fashion taste to designers that were closer to the Avant-Garde designs explored in this paper. During the introductory years in my high school career, I was obsessed with art that I viewed as experimental, and the specific elements of the piece that made me view it that way. All of these different influences factored into my decision to explore Japanese Avant-Garde designers from the 20th century for my JRPS.

My guiding question for this literature review was: How has the work of Japanese Avant-Garde designers during the 20th century radicalized the Western fashion hemisphere? Through my research, I was able to come up with a thesis to accurately answer this question: Japanese Avant-garde fashion has forced people to completely reconsider their definition of fashion, and beauty, through radicalized design methods

that were previously unheard of. These designers were able to convey their message through the use of form, construction, color, and material.

What is Avant-Garde?

Paul Wood's book titled *The Challenge of the Avant-Garde* examines the historical relevance of the Avant-Garde movement throughout history, with specific regard to Avant-Garde art. The term Avant-Garde, as Wood explains, was initially in reference to the advance guard of an army, with the term being traced back to the middle ages in Europe (Wood, 7). Wood notes that in modern context, the term Avant-Garde does not hold the same connotation, as it is now in reference to the specific characteristics of modern art (Wood, 7). Wood stresses the theoretical and ideological context behind the term:

> Its positive connotations are of forging ahead, breaking down barriers, caring nothing for expectation, being innovative, challenging convention, and so on. 'Avant-gardism' does have a negative side, because of its association with difficulty and incomprehensibility. (Wood, 7)

Wood declares that the term Avant-Garde has been historically used as a descriptor of the most adventurous experiments in modern art (Wood, 7). Prominent movements that fall under this category are Impressionism, Expressionism, Cubism, Abstract Art, Surrealism,

Pop Art, Minimalism, and Conceptual Art (Wood, 7). As Wood notes, prominent figures of these movements in modern times are Pablo Picasso, Vincent Van Gogh, Salvador Dali, and Piet Mondrien among others (Wood, 9). Wood theorizes that the common characteristic between these artists is the fact that they were all newsworthy and labeled "scandalous", thus being categorized Avant-Garde (Wood, 9).

Wood points out that the definition of the term Avant-Garde has constantly been identified by historians as indisputable. However, as noted by Wood, Avant-Garde has no actual definition in the "New Encyclopaedia Britannica", nor in the "Macmillan Dictionary of Art", making it hard to pinpoint the true meaning of the word (Wood, 9). As argued by Wood, the term Avant-Garde being absent from the majority of Western dictionaries makes it seem as if the definition of the word was so obvious, or that the word contained too little significance to be defined (Wood, 10). This lack of definition, Wood theorizes, makes the term Avant-Garde the epitome of an ideological concept (Wood, 10).

Italian Academic Renato Poggioli's "Theory of the Avant Garde" presents a philosophical exploration of the meaning behind Avant-Garde. In his article, Poggioli states that

> In the case of the avant-garde, it is an argument of self-assertion or self defense used by a society in the strict sense against society in the larger sense. We might even say that avant-garde ideology is a social phenomenon precisely because of the social or antisocial character of the cultural and artistic manifestations that it sustains and expresses. (Poggioli, 4)

To say what the Avant-Garde is *not*, Poggioli argues, is in reality to define what the Avant-Garde *is* within the minds of individuals (Poggioli, 4).

Jackson Pollock, *Cathedral*, 1947, enamel and aluminium paint on canvas, 182 x 98 cm, Dallas Museum of Fine Arts

As Wood states, the period directly following World War II was considered the period which gave rise to the incorporation of modern art within society (Wood, 10). The start of modern art museums, the earliest being MOMA in 1929, served as a spotlight for

Avant-Garde schools of art (Wood, 10). Similarly beneficial to the modern art movement, the incorporation of modern art within pre-established museums had the effect of coupling newly established art movements with the works of artists referred to as "Old Masters". (Wood, 10) As a result of this coupling, the late 1960's saw the rise of modern art movements within the broader culture of the West (Wood, 10). Wood suggests that at this time, the term Avant-Garde became associated with the modernist movement and as a way to describe critical discourse within art, as well as the values expressed by modernism (Wood, 11).

Wood notes that there was a clear parallel between Avant-Artists and Anarchist ideologies (Wood, 185). As quoted by Wood, english writer G.K. Chesterton Makes the claim that: "An artist is identical to an Anarchist" (Wood, 185). Wood asserts that the work of an Avant-Garde artist "disregards all governments, abolishes all conventions", and thus, embedded within the Avant-Garde movement is a radicalized nature (Wood, 185). However, Wood indicates that early Avant-Garde art was not seen as anarchic because of the potential threat to cultural values that the art attempted to break down, but because of the political allegiances of the artists behind the works (Wood, 186). As a result, Western society saw this kind of art as destructive to the core values that were still embedded within previous schools of thought (Wood, 186).

Otto Von Busch of Parsons School of Design in New York demonstrates the relationship between the works of Japanese designer Rei Kawakubo and the concept of the Avant-Garde in his article "Beyond the in-between: Rei Kawakubo at The Met and the Clash Between Eastern and Western Concepts in Fashion Studies". In his article, Von Busch uses a quote from the exhibition catalogue of the Metropolitan Museum's presentation on the work of Rei Kawakubo (Von Busch, 112):

> Beyond her pursuit of 'newness', Kawakubo exhibits several other preoccupations of avantgarde modernism. Perhaps the most notable is the tension between originality and reproduction, which is explored in Model/Multiple through the collection Abstract Excellence. [...] Through the conceits of seriality and repetition, the designer created the illusion of uniformity and standardization. [...]. A meditation on variations of a single form, the collection represents a powerful statement on the unstable connection between unique artwork and mass-produced commodity. (Von Busch, 121)

Von Busch argues that the work of Rei Kawakubo forces the viewer to consider the relationship between the original and the mass-produced garment, which can be seen through the use of repetition, as well as the slight deviation between individual looks (Von Busch, 121).

European Fashion Since the Renaissance & Trade with Asian Countries

Author Hiroshi Narumi's article "Fashion Orientalism and the Limits of Counter Culture" explores the historical effects of exocisized Asian dress within Europe. A common belief regarding the influence of Asian design within the world of fashion is that the beginning of this phenomena can be traced back to the 1980s and 1990s (Narumi, 312). However, this belief, as argued by Narumi, is heavily influenced by Western fashion orientalism as well as concepts of ethnic dressing within the West that have gone on for centuries (Narumi, 311). Fashion, as Narumi notes, is constantly written and rewritten by the West from the viewpoint of a Eurocentric industry (Narumi, 311). Narumi argues that Western fashion's obsession with ethnographic design has led to European dominance over non-Western culture. He writes :

> Western hegemony has been constantly involved in the objectification and the exoticisation of the non-West by constructing and distributing representations of 'the Orient'. [Edward] Said's critical framework is still useful in recognising the cultural hegemony and global expansion of the Western fashion industry, which I shall call 'fashion Orientalism'. (Narumi, 312)

Europe's dominance over the fashion industry has been apparent over the past five centuries. As outlined in author Timothy McCall's article titled "Materials for Renaissance Fashion," the delineations used to separate social classes post-Middle Ages

lead to the pioneering of early modern material culture (McCall, 1449). During the European Renaissance, a period from the 14th century to the 17th century, a small group of social elite signaled their status through the cut and color of their garments (McCall, 1451). McCall adds that constantly changing markers of identity such as age, gender, and profession were also reflected through garments (McCall, 1450). These distinctions, as McCall contends, not only solidified but amplified class barriers throughout Renaissance Europe (McCall, 1450). Even in the modern era, systems of Renaissance social hierarchy persist through conformity as well as distinctions of identity through fashion (McCall, 1459).

In Renaissance Europe, color was used to distinguish between social classes (McCall, 1450). McCall points to crimson as one of the main colors used for the purpose of distinguishing between social classes (McCall, 1450). McCall further argues that because crimson garments were worn only by high-ranking members of society, such as doctors, nobles, and representatives (\governors and jurors), this clothing acted as a visual representation of the wealth and power of the wearer (McCall, 1450). According to McCall, because of this visual wealth marker, restrictive laws governing the use of crimson were put in place, preventing people of lower social status from wearing these garments (McCall, 1450). In his article, McCall uses a quote from Franciscan missionary

and priest Bernardino de Siena to express the allure and status behind the fabric: "Sumptuary laws forbade those who worked the land from wearing crimson…and the ever shrill preacher Bernardino de Siena shamed those tempted to dress above their station by asserting that 'there is no one of such little worth' who does not wish to be clad in crimson" (McCall, 1450).

McCall argues that the allure behind crimson, as well as similarly prized fabrics, was not due to the colors themselves, but the pigments that were used to construct the fabric dyes (McCall, 1451). The natural resources used to create the pigments tended to come from either plants or animals, such as insects and mollusks (McCall, 1451). The rarest of these pigments came from small insects such as the Kermes Vermilio, Laccifer Lacca, and Cochineal (McCall, 1451). These pigments would then be combined with other sought-after materials such as silks, golds, and similarly coveted pigments to express the social standing of the wearer (McCall, 1451).

In their article "East & West: textiles and fashion in early modern Europe," Professors Beverly Lemire and Giorgio Riello explore the history of textiles and the relationship between Asian textiles and the European fashion market throughout the Renaissance era. In their article, Lemire and Riello describe silk's origins on the European market: during the Middle Ages, newly found trade networks that connected

Europe to Asian empires saw the emergence of silk in European society (Lemire and Riello, 2). Lemire and Riello go on to explain that due to the material's rarity as well as European notions of exoticism, silk became a high-value commodity in Renaissance society (Lemire and Riello, 2). During the twelfth century, expanded trade networks that connected Europe to Asian empires led to the expansion of the silk industry throughout Europe (Lemire and Riello, 2). As a result of this expansion, trade-oriented cities saw economic growth, and silk became one of the most coveted textiles (Lemire and Riello, 2). During this era silk became synonymous with wealth, adorning the likes of bishops and nobility, as well as being used for altars, formal robes, and vestments (Lemire and Riello, 2). As noted by Lemire and Riello, as the effects of the silk trade spread throughout Europe, the social elite saw the need to limit the textile to the upper class. Legislation was passed that banned the consumption of silk by common people (Lemire and Riello 2). Similarly prohibited goods included "furs and precious metals, Indian, Chinese and Persian commodities" (Lemire and Riello, 2).

Lemire and Riello contend that despite the social elite's attempts to control the distribution of these coveted fabrics, the newfound wealth brought in by merchants significantly changed European society (Lemire and Riello, 3). Lemire and Reillo demonstrate this in their article:

> This commerce brought wealth to European merchants and traders who re-channelled the flow of spices, textiles and other wares accumulated along the Asian trade routes, generating a new commercial energy in late medieval Europe that transformed cities and augmented the bourgeois classes. (Lemire and Reillo, 3)

Reillo and Lemire explain that over time, enforcement of this legislation decreased due to the introduction of new regulations permitting the use of silks by common people in specific scenarios (Lemire and Riello, 3). Lemire and Riello also point this change in regulation to growing social defiance surrounding dress and societal norms (Lemire and Riello, 3). Because European society during this time was changing, European fashion was also starting to see massive changes take place. Lemire and Riello illustrate this in their writing when they remark:

> After 1501 when direct sea-going traffic expanded between Europe and Asia, European governments and societies struggled to accommodate conflicting pressures: to preserve the existing hierarchies and to contain the tensions unleashed by social and economic change. All the while, the shifting aesthetics of fashion produced more and more fancies to enrapture consumers and enrage the beleaguered authorities. The reiteration and reissue of sumptuary regulation reflects the failures of governments to enforce restraint in order to preserve for the elites a monopoly on the use of commodities like silk. (Lemire and Reillo, 3)

As a result of sumptuary legislation, local production of fine textiles such as silk emerged throughout European cities (Lemire and Riello, 3). As Lemire and Riello highlight, in fifteenth-century Italy, cities such as Sienna were notorious for the mass production of silk for its citizens (Lemire and Reillo, 3). Lemire and Riello highlight that throughout the

ensuing centuries, similar means of silk production spread throughout the rest of Europe, including France and parts of England (Lemire, 3).

As noted by Lemire and Riello, during the following centuries, the economic growth of the silk industry placed more and more demand on imports, as well as textiles coming from Asia (Lemire and Riello, 3). As demand grew, more sumptuary legislation was put in place to control the social stratum by the ruling classes (Lemire and Riello, 3). In the late fifteenth century, significant emphasis was placed on the prohibition of textiles, as well as garments themselves (Lemire and Riello, 3). As Lemire and Reillo point out, the usage of silk in garments was restricted for "coats, shoes, neckcloths, and such like, unless they belonged to the aristocratic gilds" (Lemire and Riello, 3).

Akin to the effect in which the silk economy had on the European renaissance, cotton, a fabric of South Asian origin, gave rise to a similar reaction throughout the Western world. In their writing, Lemire and Reillo theorize that the relationship between Asian textiles and the social hierarchy of fashion can be seen more prominently with cottons than that of the silk industry (Lemire and Riello, 3). Lemire and Riello point to the mass introduction of cottons onto the European market in the late fifteenth century, when, as a result of the Portuguese trade with India, new connections to Europe by sea saw the expansion of several pre-established trade routes (Lemire and Riello, 4). As

Lemire and Riello note, Europe had previously had limited interactions with cotton textiles(Lemire and Riello, 4). Upon their introduction to the textile market, Europeans became fascinated with Indian cottons. Lemire and Riello postulate that this fascination could have been due to cotton's adaptability to different colors and patterns, as well as its increased efficiency and cheaper cost to manufacture (Lemire and Riello, 4). These newly introduced cottons were unlike anything that Europe had been exposed to previously, and as a result, cotton became highly coveted by European traders and the populace alike (Lemire and Riello, 4). Lemire and Reillo point out that this sentiment can be especially seen in the writings of John Ovington, an English priest whose voyage to western India exposed him to the production of cotton. In fact, Lemire and Riello use a quote of Ovington's to illustrate the fascination Europeans had with Indian cottons:

> 'In some things the artists of India out-do all the ingenuity of Europe, viz., the painting of chintes ot calicoes, which in Europe cannot be paralleled, either in their brightness and life of colour or in their continuance upon the cloth'. (Lemire and Riello, 4)

Lemire and Riello claim that during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, significant attempts were made by European textile manufacturers to reproduce Asian goods (Lemire and Riello, 4). Lemire and Reillo note that these textiles were reappropriated to fit European preferences, and? the means with which the textiles were

produced significantly differed from that of Indian production (Lemire and Riello, 4). Lemire and Riello highlight that the success of cotton during this era was due to the versatility of the textile as well as its availability to broader social classes (Lemire and Riello, 4). Inexpensive cottons were used in the production of shirts and handkerchiefs, which could be afforded by commoners, whereas more expensive cottons were used to create draperies, as well as more extravagant garments (Lemire and Riello, 4). Cotton, as Lemire and Riello note, "sparked desires and encouraged fashion consciousness of various sorts down the social scale" (Lemire and Riello 4).

As a result of the newfound fashion consciousness stated previously, as well as the mass importation of cottons from India, a reinstatement of previously enforced sumptuary legislation was placed on the imported cotton industries (Lemire and Riello, 5). Lemire and Reillo report that this legislation produced significant attempts from Europeans to copy the techniques used by Indian textile makers (Lemire and Riello, 5). However, this proved to be futile, as little was known about the process in which they were made (Lemire and Riello, 5). Lemire and Riello note that as demand for imitation textiles in Europe continued to grow, so did the need for European textile manufacturers to innovate in order to meet the needs of the populus (Lemire and Riello, 5). European entrepreneurs sought to master the design techniques used by Indian textile makers, and apply those

techniques to locally made fabrics such as linens (Lemire and Riello, 5). As Lemire and Riello note, practices of block printing were common among European textile makers, but this practice was only able to produce simple motifs, and prints were only able to be applied onto specific fabrics, such as linen and wool (Lemire and Riello, 5).

During the Enlightenment period, developments within dress that resemble common identifiers of the modern fashion industry in the West begin to emerge (Lemire, 27). Beverly Lemire, in her article titled "Clothing and Fashion: Structure and Hierarchy in Dress" explores the ways in which fashion evolved directly following the Renaissance. For a limited time during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, engraved prints of dresses were used as an early way of marketing garments (Lemire, 13). Soon after, this changed due to the production of the first formal fashion journal, titled "Le Mercure Galant", whose introduction in the 1670s would mark a turning point in the ways that people could view garments (Lemire, 13). Trends could now be recorded, as well as readers of the magazine could now choose from a plethora of new and unique styles (Lemire, 13). In the following years, a rise in the amount of new fashion-oriented journals gave rise to many of the fashion journals seen today, most notably Vogue (Lemire, 13).

Lemire pinpoints the 17th century as the time when Europe's role as the center of high fashion was solidified (Lemire, 14). As Lemire suggests, the goal of France's king,

Louis XIV, was to solidify France's ownership over the entire fashion industry (Lemire, 14). France, according to Lemire, was "intended to make high fashion to France what the gold mines of Peru had been to Spain" (Lemire, 14). This initiative led to France's garment industry being synonymous with luxury, with countless other cities basing their trends on the styles of Paris (Lemire, 14). France's status within the modern fashion industry would go unrivaled, and is still befitting to this day (Lemire, 14). Lemire adds to this statement within her writings when she says: "Haute couture became synonymous with Parisian fashion house" (Lemire, 14).

Lemire points to the mid eighteenth century as a significant turning point in modern fashion (Lemire, 14). Lemire pinpoints the significance of this time period to the work of Charles Fredric Worth, an Englishman who is regarded as one of the founders of modern haute-couture, as well as a multitude of other contributions to the fashion industry (Lemire, 14). Worth, Lemire argues, created the pattern that was used by generations of couture houses; both the use of runway models to show off completed garments and the involvement of the customer in the creation of the garments proved to revolutionise the ways in which fashion is presented (Lemire, 14).

"Die Madenwalt", a fashion magazine, is regarded by Lemire as setting the standard for fashion publications throughout Europe (Lemire, 14). Due to the fact that the

magazine was printed in over ten languages, “Die Madenwalt” became one of France's largest exports during the nineteenth century, only stopping due to communications restrictions during the Siege of Paris in 1870 (Lemire, 14). However, Lemire notes that the popularity of the magazine resumed following the end of the war (Lemire, 14).

As seen in both “Materials for Renaissance Fashion” and “East & West: textiles and fashion in early modern Europe,” structural hierarchies and the economy created through textile trades between Europe and Asia revolutionized Europe’s garment industry, as well as created a fashion based on personal expression rather than necessity (Lemire and Riello, 8). Timothy McCall’s article concludes by drawing the connection between Renaissance fashion and clothing within the twenty-first century:

> While twenty-first-century fashion is habitually thought to express one’s unique individuality, it is likewise conformist and corporate, connecting members of various groups, cultures, and subcultures. In early as in postmodernity, social imitation consolidates identity, and fashion embodies and reveals both affiliation and distinction. (McCall, 1459)

While the writing of Lemire and Riello does not explicitly address the implications of Asian textiles within a modern context, they conclude their article by addressing the overall effect that European trade with Asian countries had on Western culture (Lemire and Riello, 8).

> Europe excelled through the application of new technologies; but they built their success on the cultural and economic structural changes propelled by centuries of imported Asian textiles. Asian fabrics had a profound impact on European design, material culture and production and the changes engendered through these imports included the constancy of change that challenged hierarchy and the profits from change that revised society. (Lemire and Riello, 8)

Disruption of Western Standards of Fashion

The work of both Yohji Yamamoto and Rei Kawakubo completely revolutionized the way in which we view beauty, form, material, color, and construction (Martin, 1). This notion is illustrated in Melissa Marra-Alvarez's article "When the West Wore East: Rei Kawakubo, Yohji Yamamoto and The Rise of the Japanese Avant-Garde in Fashion." Marra-Alvarez remarks that the introduction of these designers in the Western world completely transformed the world of fashion in the West (Marra-Alvarez, 1). In her article, Marra-Alvarez closes the introduction with a quote from fashion historian Richard Martin. Martin's article titled "Our Kimono Mind: Reflections on 'Japanese Design: A Survey Since 1950'," pinpoints the effect kimonos had on the works of prominent Japanese Avant-Garde fashion designers, as well as the effect Japan has had on the Western fashion industry. Martin introduces the article detailing the influence Japan had on the West, stating: "we in the West have seen our world transformed by Japanese dress…It is

impossible to describe and analyze late twentieth-century fashion in Europe and America without taking account of the substantive contribution of Japanese design" (Martin, 215).

Deputy Director of the Museum at FIT Patricia Mears dedicated the article "Exhibiting Asia: the global impact of Japanese fashion in museums and galleries'' to the exploration of Yohji Yamamoto and Rei Kawakubo's role in innovating fashion in the West. Prior to the arrival of Yamamoto and Kawakubo in both Paris and the United States, the West had minimal exposure to prominent Japanese designers (Marra-Alvarez, 1). Throughout the 1960s, three main Japanese designers, most notably Kenzo Takada, Hanae Mori, and Issey Miyake, designed garments in Paris (Marra-Alvarez 1). However, Mears remarks that there is a significant dissimilitude between the work of this era of designers and their successors. Marra-Alvarez explains that the work of Mori and Takada tended to conform to traditional elements of Western design (Marra-Alvarez, 3). Marra-Alvarez suggests that evident in the work of Mori and Takada was the integration of components regarding traditional Japanese culture (Marra-Alvarez, 1). Patricia Mears explains in her article that while the designs these two designers created blended elements of Western and Eastern cultures through the use of bright floral fabrics, kimono-inspired coats, and traditional Japanese imagery, the silhouettes of the garments followed Western notions of beauty and style (Exhibiting Asia, 3).

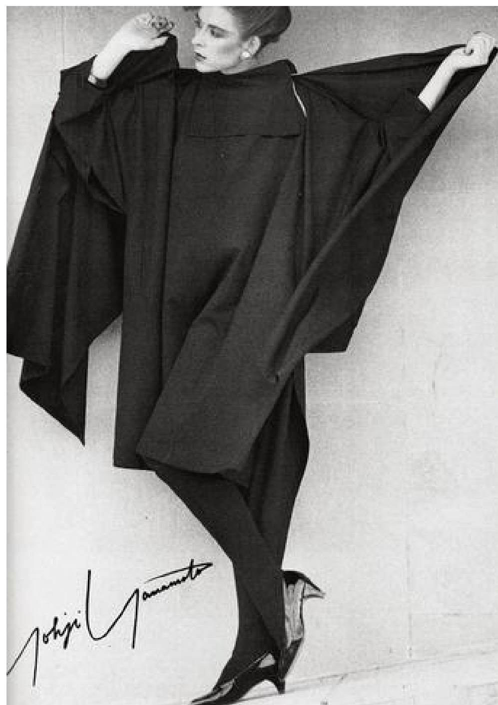
Irving Penn, *Issey Miyake*, 1988, Photograph.

Marra-Alvarez focuses on Issey Miyake, due to the fact that Miyake represents an important departure from the Western-conforming designs of his peers (Exhibiting Asia, 3). The work of Issey Miyake was identified through the use of rough fabrics, technologically advanced synthetics, as well as textiles rooted in Japanese cultural significance (Exhibiting Asia, 3). As Mears notes, "The use of such fabrics combined with innovative construction techniques allowed Miyake to make some of the most extraordinary garments ever seen" (Exhibiting Asia, 3). Akin to the work of Mori and Takada, Miyake's garments explored the relationship between traditional Japanese garments and Western design (Marra-Alvarez, 2). Marra-Alvarez exemplifies this thinking

in her article when she quotes the *New York Times*: "'Issey Miyake has a trick of turning Japanese work clothes such as baggy pants and loose coats into useful, muted, casual dress for Westerners'" (Marra-Alvarez, 2). However, due to the forward-thinking nature of Miyake, he is often regarded as the start of the departure from conventional standards of Western fashion (Marra-Alvarez, 2).

Melissa Marra-Alvarez highlights how the work of Kawakubo and Yamamoto challenged beliefs in the West surrounding beauty and design through their garments by moving away from form-fitting garments that highlighted traditionally sexualized areas of the body (Marra-Alvarez, 1). Marra-Alvarez goes on to explain that the garments that both Rei Kawakubo and Yohji Yamamoto designed commonly contained elements of loose-fitting fabrics, asymmetrical hemlines, as well as unconventional silhouettes which were not associated with Western beauty standards (Marra-Alvarez, 1). A second and third commonality between the two designers is the consistent use of black within their garments, as well as the use of rough-textured textiles in order to bear resemblance to weathering (Marra-Alvarez, 1). This revolutionary way of designing was initially met with negativity, which Marra-Alvarez attributes to westerners' unfamiliarity with the designers' use of form (Marra-Alvarez, 1). As Western audiences were previously accustomed to the overly sexualized garments that set the standard for European fashion,

Kawakubo and Yamamoto's radicalization of the female form seemed preposterous (Marra-Alvarez, 1). This reaction is evident in Marra-Alvarez's paper when she quotes fashion critic John Duka's 1982 *New York Times* article "A New Look from Japan'' as an illustration of the radical and "absurd" nature of Kawakubo's and Yamamoto's designs: "'[Yamamoto's clothes] simply do not follow the shape of the body in any conventional manner...Whereas most clothes accentuate a natural verticality, Mr. Yamamoto's seem almost horizontal'" (Marra-Alvarez, 1).



Yohji Yamamoto, 1981.

Yuniya Kawamura's 2004 article titled "The Japanese revolution in Paris fashion" focuses on the timeline of Kawakubo, and Yamamoto's influence on the Parisian fashion scene. Kawamura writes that in April of 1981, Rei Kawakubo and Yohji Yamamoto

presented their debut collection near Paris's Place Vendome (Kawamura, 2). This collection was a joint project between both Kawakubo and Yamamoto, but it was Yamamoto's initial idea to work in tandem (Kawamura, 4). In the article, Kawamura quotes Yamamoto writing about the way in which the collaboration with Kawakubo yielded a collection that had a greater impact than expected:

> I convinced Ms. Kawakubo to do the show with me in Paris. She was reluctant, but I finally managed to convince her. As a result, the fact that we did it together in April 1981 made a big difference, and it turned out to be very influential and powerful and gave an enormous impact to the French. (Kawamura, 4)

While Kawakubo was hesitant to present in Paris due to the funding required to do so, Kawamura points out that she also realized that it was necessary in order to establish herself as an influential designer (Kawamura, 5). The first of the collections presented by the designers did not end up being successful (Kawamura, 5). Yamamoto did not have high expectations for his debut show:

> I had no connection with journalists in France so I knew I wouldn't be able to attract that many people although I already had a store in Paris. I just wanted to do a small show in a small boutique. I didn't even have a showroom ready for buyers to see my clothes after the show. (Kawamura, 5)

Only about one hundred attendees came to the show, but one French publicist at the show was impressed by the work of Yamamoto and offered to assist the designer in managing his brand image (Kawamura, 5). Despite the mediocre reception of their debut

show, both designers ended up being included on the French Fashion Federation's list of seasonal collections due to the revolutionary nature of the designs (Kawamura, 6). As Kawamura points out, the second collection of Yamamoto's propelled him into significant success: "retailers rushed to Yamamoto's showroom and stood in front of the surrounding mirrors to experiment with twisting, turning, and draping some of the exquisitely complicated pieces from his Spring collection" (Kawamura, 6). Kawakubo was also quick to enter the Parisian market, opening up her first store in 1982 (Kawamura, 7).

While the rapid success of the designers within the Paresian market propelled the designers into stardom, response to the work of Kawakubo and Yamamoto in the United States was mostly negative (Marra-Alvarez, 2). As Marra-Alvarez highlights, the use of tattered edges and oversized silhouettes were misinterpreted by Americans as a ridicule of conventional standards of Western beauty (Marra-Alvarez, 2). Similarly, the dark, monochromatic palette commonly used within the work of both Kawakubo and Yamamoto was misinterpreted by the American audience because of its association with death and mourning in Western culture (Marra-Alvarez, 2). In her article, Marra-Alvarez spotlights this thinking, stating:

> In the United States initial reception of their work was less than favorable, as most Americans viewed the oversized, deconstructed garments, with their tattered edges and misplaced pockets as an outright mockery of conventional clothing

> styles. In addition to projecting what was widely perceived as an impoverished look, an almost exclusive adherence to the use of the color black in their creations was misinterpreted as a reflection of dread and hopelessness, given its association with death in western cultures. (Marra-Alvarez, 2)

Marra-Alvarez argues that the use of black within the work of Kawakubo and Yamamoto was not used as imagery of death, but was instead used as a way to remove gender and sexuality from the clothing (Marra-Alvarez, 2). This argument from Marra-Alvarez contrasts with the writing of other experts on the topic. For instance, Patricia Mears argues that the use of black within the work of Yohji Yamamoto is actually in relationship with traditional Japanese cultural norms (Yamamoto, 4). As Mears notes, the usage of black in Japan denotes both rural heritage as well as the status of a warrior within society (Yamamoto, 4).

Similar to the initial reaction of the Paresians, Americans were appalled by the radical designs presented by both Kawakubo and Yamamoto (Marra-Alvarez, 2). One common opinion of the work among Americans, as Marra-Alvarez notes, was that the designs were both “anti-female” and “anti-establishment”, which also supported the assumption that the designers were in complete rejection of Western beauty standards (Marra-Alvarez, 2). As Rei Kawakubo states, the garments that she created were for the modern woman, and as such, the designs themselves were completely divergent from the

fashion typically seen throughout the West (Marra-Alvarez, 3). Marra-Alvarez makes the argument that by designing from this standpoint, Rei Kawakubo completely redefined beauty in the West (Marra-Alvarez, 3). This reinterpretation through clothing, as Marra-Alvarez indicates, views beauty in terms of one's strength and independence, as well as the relationship between the garment and the person wearing it (Marra-Alvarez, 3). Author Claire Wilcox shares similar thinking to the theory proposed by Marra-Alvarez in her article "Comme Des Garçons". According to Wilcox, when Rei Kawakubo opened her introductory shop within Tokyo's Minami-Aoyama district, she intentionally removed the mirrors "because Kawakubo wanted women to buy clothes because of how they felt rather than the way they looked" (Wilcox, 2).

Form & Function

In her article titled "Exhibiting Asia: the global impact of Japanese fashion in museums and galleries" Patricia Mears analyses the effect that the radicalized fashion of Rei Kawakubo and Yohji Yamamoto had on the Western world, as well as the role museum exhibitions had in solidifying their influence. As Mears establishes, Kawakubo and Yamamoto are oftentimes viewed as a collective due to the designers' similarity in creative vision (Exhibiting Asia, 5). As mentioned previously in the literature review,

Kawakubo and Yamamoto did in fact work in tandem for a brief period during their initial entrance to the Parisian fashion scene (Exhibiting Asia, 5). However, Mears theorizes that the work of Kawakubo and Yamamoto are actually in complete contrast with one another (Exhibiting Asia, 5). The work of Rei Kawakubo aims to redefine widely accepted notions of beauty in the Western world, creating for the "woman of today" as opposed to a reinterpretation of the past (Exhibiting Asia, 6). Conversely, the work of Yohji Yamamoto aims to reinterpret elements of historical Western dress, and combines them with nontraditional materials in such a way that Mears views as "the most beautiful of today's avant-garde fashions"(Exhibiting Asia, 6). Marra-Alvarez affirms Mears' thinking about Kawakubo in her article, stating that the main incentive behind her garments was to create something that had never been seen before (Marra-Alvarez, 3). Over time, public reaction to these garments started to shift: whereas at one point the designs elicited shock, analysis of the garments revealed both the intricacies and the intellectual approach Kawakubo used to design her garments (Marra-Alvarez, 3).

Rei Kawakubo, *Lumps and Bumps*, 1997.

American fashion critic Cathy Horyn's article titled "Gang of Four" expands on Rei Kawakubo's design process, by shadowing Kawakubo as well as her successors in her Tokyo headquarters in order to gain firsthand experience with how Kawakubo manages her company. Horyn opens her writing by exemplifying a specific collection from Comme Des Garcons titled "Lumps and Bumps", in which she points out Kawakubo's process of turning an idea into a completed garment (Horyn, 1). Horyn writes "if you begin with the outline made by her shapes (the classic ''silhouette'') and then pull back -- moving away, as it were, from the confinements of fashion -- you realize that Kawakubo has in fact recreated a reality of the late 20th century" (Horyn, 1). As Horyn states, the misshapen growths seen on the garment are actually Kawakubo's representation of the loose outline of a backpack into the body of the garment, and the silhouette of a telephone is intended

to show how phones are now an extension of oneself (Horyn, 1). Kawakbubo, as Horyn notes, is closer to that of an artist than that of a designer, not looking to solve the problems of dressmaking but rather solve the problems of consciousness (Horyn, 1).

As stated previously, Mears emphasizes an important distinction between Kawakubo and Yamamoto. Although both of these designers are usually lumped together when talking about Japanese avant-garde fashion, their design philosophies differ from one another (Exhibiting Asia, 5). In Mears' paper, she includes a quote from philosopher Kiyokazu Washida's essay "The Past, the Feminine, and the Vain". Washida uses an analogy to compare the philosophies of both designers:

> Rei Kawakubo, in many ways a comrade of Yohji Yamamoto's, confronts the logic of Fashion head on, by constantly renewing the "now:" in other words, by accelerating the change of Fashion, or by producing "now" before "now" is usurped. She moves faster than Fashion, manufacturing her "now" before "now" ceases to be. Renewing herself so quickly that no one can keep up, she does not allow herself to become entrenched in a fixed image, or to imitate herself. (Exhibiting Asia, 7)

In this passage, Washida makes the argument that Rei Kawakubo is constantly striving to revolutionize fashion by creating garments that are unlike anything she has created or that the world has seen before. Washida goes on to discuss Yamamoto's design philosophy, saying:

> Yamamoto, on the other hand, turns his gaze backwards. Picture someone standing at a bridge. Fashion involves that person gazing at the water approaching from upstream, fixing their attention on what will be next. Now, the reversal of that gaze, in other words, turning to look in the direction in which the water disappears, will mean an approach where attention is not focused on that which is about to become "now," but on the phase of time when "now" ceases to be "now." Yohji often says that "now" is transient. Perhaps because he is able to look at things this way, he can touch the fleeting "now" and capture the very moment when things are destroyed and disappear. (Yamamoto 2002: np)

Washida views Yamamoto's design philosophy as one in which the designer is trying to innovate in a way that still contains elements found in clothing of the past (Exhibiting Asia, 6). By designing in a way in which Yamamoto is able to capture the "now" as it ceases to be, Yamamoto is able to convey nostalgia through his garments (Exhibiting Asia, 6).

Mears highlights a key similarity between the two designers: form. Yohji Yamamoto's rejection of historically Western standards of beauty is similar to that of Kawakubo, moving away from clothing that sexualizes the body through tight hugging fabric (Exhibiting Asia, 6). Additionally, Yamamoto added aspects of divagating gender norms into his collection by styling women in menswear. Mears theorizes that this aspect of gender-bending could have possibly been influenced by traditional Japanese performing arts, such as the practice of Onnagata, in which male actors play female roles during performances (Mears, 3).

Yohji Yamamoto, 2020

This theory of gender-bending can be seen in Mears' other writings. For instance, in her article titled "Yohji Yamamoto", Mears theorizes that a key element included in the work of Yamamoto is respect for women. Mears notes that this element could possibly be overlooked due to the radicalized rejection of Western beauty apparent in his designs (Yohji Yamamoto, 3). This respect for women, as Mears argues, is apparent through the lack of oversexualization commonly seen in womenswear, as well as Yamamoto's incorporation of menswear into womens' fashion (Exhibiting Asia, 7). As Mear's writes:

> Deliberately absent from his runway presentations were the requisites of the contemporary high-fashion wardrobe for women: high heels, rising hemlines, plunging necklines, and sheer fabrics. (Yohji Yamamoto, 6)

Yohji Yamamoto's use of form as a dismissal of Western ideas of female sexuality is similarly theorized by the work of another author, Richard Martin. Martin writes about this in his article titled "Yohji Yamamoto". In this article, Martin makes the claim that Yohji Yamamoto's rejection of Western beauty standards can specifically be seen within his use of layering, draping, and wrapping fabric around the body in such a way that avoids conventional ideas of beauty (Martin, Yohji Yamamoto, 1). Martin points to this use of form as being based on the traditional Japanese garment, the Kimono (Martin, Yohji Yamamoto, 1).

Intertwined within the work of Yohji Yamamoto are traditional Japanese design philosophies rooted in rejection of opulence and perfectionism (Martin, Yohji Yamamoto, 1). Martin claims that Yohji Yamamoto's use of asymmetry within his work is directly related to the Japanese concept of Wabi-Sabi (Martin, Yohji Yamamoto, 1). Wabi-Sabi is a concept in which beauty is seen in imperfection due to its resemblance to nature (Martin, Yohji Yamamoto, 1).

Martin claims this concept is seen in Yamamoto's work through "strange flaps, pockets, and layers, lopsided collars and hems, set off by the body in motion, and the

labels inside are inscribed with the epithet, 'There is nothing so boring as a neat and tidy look'" (Martin, Yohji Yamamoto, 1). As the clothing of Yamamoto is viewed as horizontal, rather than vertical which is common in the West, Martin theorizes that this directly relates to concepts of dimension within Wabi Sabi (Martin, Yohji Yamamoto, 1).

Mears similarly writes about Yohji Yamamoto's Incorporation of Wabi-Sabi within his work:

> Yamamoto's ability to see beauty in degradation, however, and to strip things to their foundation in a search for the inherent integrity of each object is profoundly Japanese. This aesthetic of imperfection, incompleteness, or poverty, is a hallmark of wabi-sabi. A worldview that originated in Zen Buddhism, wabi-sabi was later applied to the creation of objects characterized by external lack of ornamentation and internal refinement (wabi) and an emphasis on the ephemeral nature of all things that eventually leads to decay (sabi). While Yamamoto did not formally study wabi-sabi, he is the product of his culture, one that is arguably the most aesthetically refined in the world. (Mears 6)

Deconstruction

The phenomena of deconstruction in fashion lead to the influence of generations of future designers, as well as changing the ways in which historians thought about fashion (Geczy and Karaminas, 1, Zborowska,1) Agata Zborowska's analysis titled "Deconstruction in contemporary fashion design: Analysis and critique" explores the

historical and theoretical conceptualizations of deconstructivist fashion, as well as looks at its relation to similar deconstructivist movements in other disciplines (Zborowska, 1). In the article, Zborowska uses the work of Rei Kawakubo as well as Martin Margiela in order to exemplify the effect that deconstruction had on the fashion hemisphere (Zborowska, 1).

Rei Kawakubo, *Jumper*, 1982, Wool.

Zborowska argues that for the majority of modern history, the definition set by fashion historians and scholars has remained relatively undisputed: clothing that seems to be unfinished, worn out, or subjected to recycling (Zborowska, 2). Deconstruction, as Zborowska notes, can be traced back to the late nineteen-eighties, with the concept still holding relevance in modern times (Zborowska, 2). Zborowska points out that the notable examples of deconstruction are not just a rejection of previous fashion, but a commentary on the entire industry throughout its history (Zborowska, 2). Zborowska observes that the role of clothing that does not seemingly serve its original intent is often categorized by the garment's artistic values (Zborowska, 2). Zborowska notes that these nonfunctional garments are often observed as being a critique of the current fashion system, a phenomenon that he notes was nonexistent within previous generations of fashion (Zborowska, 2). Unlike its architectural counterpart, deconstruction in fashion has been widely under-analysed by critics, and Zbowoska attributes this to the fact that deconstruction is generally viewed as one of the many “Fast-Changing trends” (Zborowska, 2). As Zborowska argues, this creates a scenario in which there is minimal consideration of the sources as well as the consequences of the Deconstructivist movement (Zborowska, 2).

Zborowska pinpoints the origins of the term "deconstruction" in terms of fashion to September of 1989, when the magazine "Details1" used the term to describe Martin Margiela's Fall-Winter 1989 collection (Zborowska, 2). Bill Cunningham, the writer of this article, is quoted in Zborowska's article, saying this about Margiela:

> Martin Margiela, formerly a Gaultier assistant, in this, his second collection on his own, provided quite a different vision of fashion of the 1990s: a beatnik, Existentialist revival [...] The construction of the clothes suggests a deconstructivist movement, where the structure of the design appears to be under attack, displacing seams, tormenting the surface with incisions. All suggest a fashion of elegant decay. (Zborowska, 4)

Zborowska illustrates that the description of deconstruction used by Cunningham resembles that of modern thinking of the deconstructivist moment (Zborowska, 4). Zborowska theorizes that the basis for deconstruction within fashion is the construction of clothing, exemplified through the use of combining multiple garments or concepts together in order to create a complete garment (Zborowska, 4). As stated by Zborowska, universal elements of deconstructivist fashion are isolated fragments of fabric, moving and unstitching seams, stiffened and misshapen areas, as well as the exposing of elements typically hidden within a garment (Zborowska, 4).

Zborowska observes that in addition to Martin Margiela, the pioneers of the deconstructivist movement were Rei Kawakubo and Yohji Yamamoto (Zborowska 4).

These designers, commonly referred to as Avant-garde, as well as the addition of the Antwerp 6 designers of Belgium made the nineteen-eighties a significant period of the deconstructivist movement (Zborowska, 4). Mainstream fashion during this era was typified by feminine cuts, glossy fabrics, and bright colors (Zborowska, 5). As noted previously, the works of both Kawakubo and Yamamoto were identified by the use of dark colors and loose silhouettes, which were in complete contrast with the mainstream fashion of the time (Zborowska, 5). These designers, Zborowska argues, broke all existing understanding of fashion (Zborowska, 5).

At the same time, beginnings of the deconstructivist movement were emerging as a result of a revival of Belgium's textile industries (Zborowska, 6). Zborowska points to "The Textile Plan", a proposition whose aim was to reinvent Belgium as a fashion capital, as well as distinguish Belgian fashion as a unique brand of the European fashion market (Zborowska, 6). This came as a result of the declining economy of the Belgian textile industry, as well as the severe neglect of fashion-based institutions such as the Royal Academy of Fine Arts Antwerp (Zborowska, 6). Zborowska establishes that the turning point in the Belgian fashion industry was through the introduction of the Antwerp six: a group of six designers who graduated from the Royal Academy of Fine Arts Antwerp in nineteen eighty and eighty one, as well as honorary member Martin Margiela (Zborowska,

6). These designers, as argued by Zboroska, solidified the national brand of fashion that Belgium was aiming to reach (Zborowska, 6).

Zborowska quotes Yuniya Kawamura in his writing to illustrate the effect of Japanese deconstruction in fashion. As established by Kawamura: “The Japanese designers were the key players in the redefinition of clothing and fashion, and some even destroyed the Western definition of the clothing system” (Zborowska, 6).

Conclusion

The work of Japanese designers such as Rei Kawakubo and Yohji Yamamoto significantly disrupted Western views of fashion, as well as beauty as a whole. Even though the West had already been influenced by Asian design, especially during the Renaissance era, the arrival of Kawakubo and Yamamoto questioned Western design standards in ways that had not previously been done. These designers served as the inspiration for a new generation of some of the most influential European Avant-Garde designers, such as Martin Margiela, Vivienne Westwood, and Demna Gvsalia.

Through the use of expanded trade routes connecting Europe with a significant portion of Asia, Europe was able to strengthen their textile economies. The introduction of Asian textiles strengthened social boundaries between the elite and the common

people, due to the exclusivity of fabrics like silk. This only led to heightened demand for these products, and as a result sumptuary law was put in place as a reaction from the elite to prevent the spread of these textiles. Over time, domestic textile industries adapted to replicate Asian textiles at a lower cost. This period during the renaissance not only established the western standards of beauty that have remained throughout the West, it also served as the start of Asia's influence on Western fashion.

During the 20th century, ideas surrounding the Avant-Garde in relation to art started to emerge, possibly due to the accelerated societal developments that took place during this era. This movement served to critique Western society, however this led to the mass integration of modern art in Western culture. This new form of artistry completely diverged from previous forms of art, focusing less on technical skill, portraits, and landscapes, reinterpreting art as a form of social defiance. As a result, modern art became one of the defining movements of the 20th century. In my research into this area, one theme between researchers was that they all differed in their interpretation of modern art works. I think that more research should be done on why this kid of art makes us feel what we feel when looking at it. For instance, a common observation between people who view the works of Mark Rothko is that it makes them feel some sort of spirituality, despite

the paintings having no visual subject. This route could make for some really interesting discoveries from art historians in the future.

Going back to my question: “How has the work of Japanese Avant-Garde designers during the 20th century radicalized the Western fashion hemisphere?”, I believe that I was only able to truly answer part of my question. Through my research, I was able to find heaps of relevant information on the works of Rei kawakubo and Yohji Yamamoto, and how they were able to radicalize western fashion in the 20th century. However, when originally deciding on a question, the first thing that I came up with was “What is Avant-Garde?”. This question I do not feel I was able to answer, due to the fact that there really is no definition of Avant-Garde. The concept of the Avant Garde has been debated by philosophers for decades, with no real conclusion draw. This question is a route that I would personally be really interested in pursuing in the future. Over the course of this year, my understanding of the work of Avant-Garde designers, both Japanese and European, has changed significantly. At the beginning, my understanding of these designers was that they were creating either to do something that had never been done before, or that they were designing like this to create controversy. Now, as a result of my research I am able to identify the real reasoning behind the works of many prominent Avant-Garde Japanese designers.

Taking inspiration from the research conducted as a result of my Literature Review, the question I have decided to explore for my Junior Research project is: How has form, construction, material, color, and culture been incorporated into the works of Japanese Avant-Garde designers during the 20th century? My goal for this project is to place myself in the shoes of Japanese Avant-Garde designers like Kawakubo and Yamamoto, and design garments through the processes and inspiration that they use. This project would be a visual expansion of the research I have done on Kawakubo and Yamamoto's design processes. This project would hopefully be finalized by creating a collection of garments that take inspiration from the works of Kawakubo and Yamamoto, with some garments being a personal attempt at designing something completely revolutionary.

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