Greenaway-Gaultier: Old Masters, Fashion Slaves

by Nita Rollins

In referring to both the upper-class attire of seventeenth-century Holland and contemporary “punk” fashion, Jean-Paul Gaultier’s costumes in The Cook, the Thief, His Wife, and Her Lover (1990) ambiguously complement the film’s critique of late capitalism.

If it were possible to specify a semiotics of fashion through knowledge of a particular designer and through the historical references and context of his fashions, how much of what is encoded in an epaulette or sash is conveyed if such a semiotics is sewn into the ornate fabric of a film? In what ways does Jean-Paul Gaultier’s “fashionable” costume design create aperture or work for closure of the signifying systems in Peter Greenaway’s The Cook, the Thief, His Wife, and Her Lover (1990)? Moreover, how might a critical reading of a recognizable designer’s work operate within a film which is itself a critical reading of social and sartorial preoccupations and pretensions? These are the questions that prompted this inquiry and that will be posed against the theoretical backdrop of Thorstein Veblen’s Theory of the Leisure Class. As an experiment in plumbing the mysteries of puttin’ on the dog, it can be taken as a corrective to the scarcity of rigorous consideration of costumery in filmic signification, particularly costumery which cannot be read simply as a device of psychological realism.¹

Conspicuous Outrage. As the enfant terrible of French haute couture, Jean-Paul Gaultier seems tailor-made for the task of dressing the rogues and arrivistes of Peter Greenaway’s The Cook, the Thief, His Wife, and Her Lover. Greenaway’s band of gauche gastronomes proves the perfect ensemble of models for a couturier who in 1984 designed a collection unceremoniously titled “You Feel As Though You’ve Eaten Too Much.” As Gaultier explains it, “People who make mistakes or dress badly are the real stylists. My . . . collection is taken from exactly those moments when you are mistaken or embarrassed.”² Implicit in Gaultier’s comments is his transgression against the venerable elitism of French haute couture, French fashion having achieved international preeminence beginning with the court of Louis XIV at Versailles. From this court’s sartorial etiquette, whose codes emblematized the social stratification of the ancien régime while literally making “the aristocracy slaves to fashion” so as to bind “potentially rebellious

Nita Rollins is completing her Ph.D. in critical studies from UCLA. She has published in Wide Angle and has an essay in the forthcoming anthology The Event of Genre.

Copyright © 1995 by the University of Texas Press, P.O. Box 7819, Austin, TX 78713-7819

Cinema Journal 35, No. 1, Fall 1995 65
nobles to the court while draining their private resources,” 3 French haute couture derives much of its enduring sumptuousity and exclusivity.

If Gaultier is somewhat of a gadfly to the hegemony of French fashion, headed by the $350 million a year multinational conglomerate, Yves St. Laurent, it is because his designs openly betray inspiration from haute couture’s nemesis, prêt-à-porter, which in turn takes its cues from popular music (video) and movies, from everyday ideologies of work and play, and less from haute couture’s designer-driven immanent evolutions. Rather than ignore the decentralization that occurred in the fashion industry in the sixties, when, as Robert Storr writes, “high fashion [and Paris as its capital] was under assault both from English and American novelty designers and from the counterculture street fashions that inspired them,” 4 Gaultier’s designs are reflexive high-low creations whose components tend toward bricolage; if Chanel is featuring combat boots for a season, the gold hooked C’s logo is prominently displayed on the toe like a kind of couture branding that denatures the boots’ aggressive practicality. Gaultier would be just as likely to give us the real unbowedlerized boots and disrupt haute couture’s aesthetic of the beautiful wherein everything anomalous is ultimately rendered harmonious. His fashions are knowingly defiant in their social and sexual improprieties, and with their extensive science fiction, cartoon, and soft porn evocations are enough to shock an already outlandish industry. Vogue once described his eighties work as a “motley fusion of punk pilferings, slattern sophistication and B-movie anecdotes.” 5

Few of the predominate economic theories of fashion history can explain unseemliness or ugliness per se, except in historically relativist terms as a result of obsolescence in a consumer culture. Thorstein Veblen’s still quite influential Theory of the Leisure Class contains a pre-Hegelian notion of the beautiful, a purely formal conception of simplicity outside any social determinations, while ugliness is characteristic of fashion in general, indeed, of all art in whose intrinsic ostentation Veblen cannot divine any strict usefulness to the world of industrial technology. As Adorno explains the positivist’s and pragmatist’s limitations in Veblen’s theory, there are values of commodity fetishism, those social qualities of exchange objects that are the desideratum of consumption, which are not entirely absorbed in the exchange process. Veblen is ambivalent about such unquantifiable, controvertible values. As Adorno notes:

Luxury has a dual character. Veblen concentrates his spotlight on one side of it: that part of the social product which does not benefit human needs and contribute to human happiness but instead is squandered in order to preserve an obsolete [hierarchical and predatory] system. The other side of luxury is the use of parts of the social product which serve not the reproduction of expended labour, directly or indirectly, but of man in so far as he is not entirely under the sway of the utility principle. Although Veblen does not explicitly distinguish between these two moments of luxury, it is unquestionably his intention to do away with the first as “conspicuous consumption” and to save the second in the name of the “fullness of life.” 6

66 Cinema Journal 35, No. 1, Fall 1995
The “punk pilferings” of Gaultier’s eighties designs—the predominance of black; the demimondaine finishes, like his Maidenform mockups of bras with circular stitched cups looking like so many moving targets; the hermaphroditic hyperbole of vestigially garnered body girdle over trousers, or long skirts for men—parody in effect Veblen’s anti-aesthetic premise that fashion is ugly. But in the case of original punk fashion, as for example Vivianne Westwood’s earliest T-shirts with deliberate cigarette burn holes from the “Let It Rock” boutique in 1973, the prevailing fashion is not felt to be beautiful, as Veblen contends, inasmuch as the beautiful reinforces, even idealizes the existent class structure—its divisions of labor, its myths of the body, and, of course, its “pecuniary canons of taste.” Veblen’s aesthetically preposterous and Puritanical claim that fashion is ugly because it involves conspicuous waste, leisure, and consumption, all in order to secure elevated social status, simply could not have accommodated punk fashion, which wanted to upend the class structure to show the ugly underbelly, to prove it did not want any part of what the Sex Pistols called “England’s dreaming.” Its “snobbery, insularity, xenophobia, and [the] repressive consensus” that the Empire was prosperous as ever.

Though fashion’s relation to class structure has become less predictable, less reified, at least since the industrial revolution, when ready-to-wear came into its own, it would be naive to claim that it therefore is no longer invested in its former conspicuous displays or that, because it is no longer primarily a trickle-down phenomenon but in these last two decades more often than not moves from street to runway, it now only reflects, to use Veblen’s phrase, the “fullness of life.” Neo-Veblenian Quentin Bell, conceding a more complex role to aesthetics in fashion, argues that conspicuous outrage, comprised of defiant and esoteric elements, is a mode of pecuniary taste which modernist culture has made as viable an indicator of wealth and status as the more familiar mode of “conspicuous consumption”: “Just as the exhibition of the person marks an immunity to vulgar morality, so does the exhibition of esoteric ideas mark a superiority to vulgar notions; the object would appear to be in both cases the same, to show one’s attachment to an informed and superior class.”

As with MTV “haute-hobo” couturier Todd Oldham, Gaultier’s conspicuous outrage is most potent at his shows, which often are staged in the street, appropriately enough, and that, in a way which seems contrary to Veblen’s reduction of fashion to financial motives, are more carnivalesque than commercial. Such was the case with his 1992 spring collection, featuring battery-operated light-up bustiers and mad-scientist headgear.

But Gaultier was also a designer of conspicuous outrage for Madonna’s Blond Ambition tour, which became the movie Truth or Dare; his black cagelike body wraps arguably exemplify superiority to “vulgar morality,” since what were once normalizing body shapers—the bones and straps of patriarchy’s “hourglass”—now brazenly emphasize musculature that defies gender and reveal, literally, the constructedness of the physical ideal. Because Gaultier’s conspicuous outrage is associated as much with so-called street fashions as with today’s version of...
Versailles—high society, celebrities, and their attendant media—it challenges Veblen’s class analysis of fashion, specifically its failure to allow for downward mobility chic. Nevertheless, neo-Veblenian theory can be instructive in analyzing Greenaway’s socially ambitious characters in a milieu that is perhaps too perfect a depiction of Veblen’s sociological version of the survival of the fittest. Greenaway’s parable of predation may in fact be the most fitting place for Veblen’s economic interpretation of fashion, because the same hyperbole that infects his theory inflects Greenaway’s world. What remains to be determined, then, is whether the conspicuous outrage of Jean-Paul Gaultier’s costume designs—a shock effect deriving principally from their historicality—is a purchase of social superiority for those who wear them. Because of Greenaway’s film’s seventeenth-century sociological and aesthetic frame of reference, it may be that such historicality that renders the costumes fashionable is also, ironically, that which cannot simply be dissolved into the specious streaming now of fashion but instead causes Gaultier’s outrage to betray itself, be swallowed up by its own conceits, and become its own critique of the clamoring of class.

**Historical Modes.** As a fashion designer of renown outside the cinema, then, Gaultier brings to film a structure of de rigueur (based on a playful deconstruction of fashion’s elitist and insular appeal which is nonetheless safeguarded by prohibitive prices), sustained by the myth of the designer genius, the fashion industry’s answer to auteurism, and this is reinforced in Greenaway’s film due to his own authorial status. As such, Gaultier’s signature structure could embroider or unravel Greenaway’s thematic concerns. In terms of Veblenian fashion theory, Gaultier’s conspicuous outrage, ostensibly evidence of pecuniary strength, which, as Veblen contends in his Darwinian model of the social, “is reputable or honorific because, in the last analysis, it argues success and superior force,” potentially subverts Greenaway’s critique of Thatcherism, as he has described it in an interview:

The film is a very angry one. The political situation that currently exists in Great Britain under Mrs. Thatcher is one of incredible sense of self-interest and greed. Society is beginning to worry entirely about the price of everything and the value of nothing, and there is a way in which *The Cook, the Thief* is an exemplum of a consumer society, personified in the Thief, Albert Spica.

Le Hollandais restaurant, the principal setting of *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife, and Her Lover*, is a cacophony of cultural references—French cuisine, Dutch art and name, British (sounding) patrons—and as such it is exaggeratedly cosmopolitan, a strenuously fashionable place where even the wait staff’s habiliments possess some sort of time-traveling panache: a mix of Star Trek stretch knit uniforms with military touches—rows of buttons (some of which are in the shape of forks and spoons), epaulettes, topped by a patent leather version of the imperious valona of the Spanish court of the seventeenth century, a collar lifted around the face by stiffened material known as the golilla. They also wear gauntlets, the
cuffed gloves that were popular accessories of the swashbuckling attire of the early seventeenth century. Amidst the predominantly seventeenth-century sartorial references is one which, if we are considering fashion's class affiliations, dates to the sixteenth century. The red color of their uniforms, while contributing to the crushing visual weight of the crimsons and scarlets in the decor and creating stock associations of violence or regality, also invokes a precise historical moment of fashion's class aspirations. James Laver in *Costume and Fashion: A Concise History*, writes:

The colors of the upper classes during the first half of the sixteenth century were extremely brightly coloured . . . Red was a favourite colour. In Cranach's portraits of German princes nearly all of them are wearing red, and in spite of sumptuary laws, the middle classes imitated them as far as they dared. It is a curious comment on human aspiration that during the Peasants' Revolt in Germany, one of the demands of the insurgents was that they should be allowed to wear red like their betters.¹⁸

Though there is an apparent promiscuity to the referencing of fashion's histories, Gaultier's costumes do not come off as perverse incongruities. First, Greenaway's Dutch painting compositions situate certain costumes within the seventeenth century. There are, for instance, startlingly authentic recreations of attire in Vermeer paintings—the linen cap and dress of the *Woman Pouring Milk*, for example, is glimpsed on several of the kitchen staff—and there are looser imitations of the cavalier style depicted in the giant Frans Hals group portrait. Georgina's last and most triumphantly regal outfit is frequently depicted in paintings of early-seventeenth-century Holland; known as a *vlieger*, in England a *ropa*, it is an overcoat, generally sleeveless, fastened at the throat and worn over gowns.

Second, there is the general impression that the costume designs achieve a cohesiveness by assimilating to the mysterious edicts of bon ton, that is, one wants to say, *in spite* of their historicality, because fashion, when conceived or perceived as a semiotic system, is emphatically present tense.¹⁹ Roland Barthes writes:

> Fashion is a semiological system and one which can know only a very long history or no history at all; for as long as its rhythms remain regular, fashion remains outside history . . . its changes are alternative, purely endogenous: it is no more than a question of simple diachrony: in order for history to intervene in fashion, it must modify its rhythms, which seems possible only with a history of very long duration.²⁰

To the extent that Gaultier's costume designs accelerate or telescope fashion's rhythms, history would seem to intervene in the film, requiring a more synchronic reading of those references to the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. What emerges wryly from their anachronism is the element of disability in the designs. The almost "hobbling" platform shoes worn by female diners resemble *chopines*; these wooden clogs, worn in Spain and Italy to protect the wearer from the filth of sixteenth-century streets, were tall enough to qualify as stilts and prompt Hamlet to remark, "Your ladyship is nearer heaven than when I saw you last."²¹ The lacing and corsetry of Georgina's attire play with an aesthetic that only officially went *out* of style in the nineteenth century (later to be

---

_Cinema Journal 35, No. 1, Fall 1995_ 69
reinstated as an underlying principle, so to speak, with the invention of elastic and the discovery of underwear).22

Georgina’s cagelike ensemble mentioned earlier, worn when she offers herself to the Cook, and the one most likely to be recognized by American audiences as Gaultier’s because of its association with Madonna (perhaps the reason for its being chosen for the film’s advertisement), is an ironic exposé of the elaborate trussing of the female figure which, at its least natural in seventeenth-century Spain, took the form of the guardainfante, “that extraordinary descendant of the sixteenth-century farthingale.” “With its frame of iron, osier and whalebone hoops, [it] not only proved resistant to every attempt to legislate it out of existence, but grew wider and wider as the years went by. In 1637 it was already so wide that women could not get through the doors of churches.”23 In response to such sartorial outlandishness, Veblen writes that

wherever wasteful expenditure and the show of abstention from effort is normally, or on an average, carried to the extent of showing obvious discomfort or voluntarily induced physical disability, there the immediate inference is that the individual in question does not perform this wasteful expenditure and undergo this disability for her own personal gain in pecuniary repute, but in behalf of someone else to whom she stands in a relation of economic dependence; a relation which in the last analysis must, in economic theory, reduce itself to a relation of servitude.24

Corporeal Couture. If, among other things, Gaultier is, with the sadomasochistic straps of Georgina’s “Madonna” corset, lightly satirizing sartorial constructions of femininity25 formerly oblivious to comfort (Bell’s “exhibition of esoteric ideas”), constructions which according to Veblen would have denoted conspicuous leisure due to the limits imposed on the wearer’s physical mobility, the satire is coarsened by the element of disability (devoid of erotic pleasure) in Georgina’s relationship with Spica, which derives more from his physical abuse than from any she might inflict upon herself to be en vogue. When Georgina comes to dinner in a gown whose falling straps expose bruised shoulders (and face), the vicarious consumption she theoretically performs on behalf of Spica—he at one point brags to the dinner party about how much Georgina spends weekly on clothes—is revealed as a desperate charade, darkening considerably the ironic allusions to historic fashion slavery. The grotesque juxtaposition of terrorized female in fashion that has begun to degenerate into frippery is one of the film’s harshest commentaries on upper-class pretensions. Simone de Beauvoir writes relatedly in The Second Sex about the self-objectification of fashion that is Georgina’s fate, at least as abused yet intransigently stylish wife:

Accidents will happen; wine is spilled on her dress, a cigarette burns it; this marks the disappearance of the luxurious and festive creature who bore herself with smiling pride into the ballroom, for she now assumes the serious and severe look of the housekeeper; it becomes all at once evident that her toilette was not a set piece like fireworks, a transient burst of splendour, intended for the lavish illumination of a moment. It is rather a rich possession, capital goods, an investment; it has meant sac-
rifice; its loss is a real disaster. Spots, tears, botched dressmaking, bad hairdos are catastrophes still more serious than a burnt roast or a broken vase, for not only does the woman of fashion [or man, I would argue] project herself into things, she has chosen to make herself a thing.26

Georgina’s relationship with Michael the Lover alters further her raiment’s status as “capital goods, an investment” because its esoteric history, its conspicuous outrage is upstaged by the exigencies of, well, taking it off. Ultimately, leisure (and its concomitant imposition of physical limitations) is the last thing her baroque lingerie connotes or can afford in these entremets.27 The evening wear gradually becomes but an encumbrance—albeit a tasteful one—to the lovers’ sexual fulfillment just as surely as—to adopt the film’s culinary logic—duck feathers that float about the kitchen are an impediment to canard à l’orange. (It is no coincidence that two of Georgina’s outfits late in the film are composed of ostrich feathers and that Spica, who doesn’t have a clue about the subversive practicality of Georgina’s attire for another man, complains to the Cook at one point about the time it takes to pluck a duck for dinner.)

The corporeal, integrally related to Greenaway’s narrative, has a dynamic relationship with the costume designs and increasingly seems to overtake them, to attenuate their integrity in a way that supercedes class motivations and manifests Greenaway’s avowed interest in the physicality of vices and virtues, as Jacobean tragedy would have represented them. But as for our question of whether the costume designs secure superior class positioning for those who wear them, they decidedly do not, not insofar as elevated social standing entails (theoretically) moral or psychological preeminence. It is precisely this atavistic presence of bodily appetites, uncontrollable and ill disguised, that focuses Veblen’s version of fashionable comportment as singularly rapacious. Of the film’s emphasis on the body as battlefield of medieval humors, its betrayals of belches and bruises, its drama of biological vagaries, Greenaway has said: “There is a medieval-like feeling in The Cook, the Thief about this rotten, worm-infested body which is covered in an extraordinary gloss of elaborate clothing, feathered hats and that sort of thing. It is as though there is an attempt to try and hide the horror, the despair, the sense of violence and lust that’s contained only just underneath.”28

In part because the kitchen and refrigerated trucks just outside its entrance are privy to so much flesh and nakedness—an abused cook and the lovers are hosed off in its doorway, and a saussier goes bare-chested—and because it is a space of labor, inflected by the slower fashion of uniforms, hence less determined by fashion’s furious cycles of emulation of the so-called leisure class, the sartorial morality of these spaces is the least assailable, this unassailability embodied in the Cook. But the putrefaction that overtakes the senses in these areas has a direct link to Spica’s scatological imagination and to the gangsters’ dirty fingernails, greasy hair, and pasty faces. Their bodies have their own somatic agenda which subtends fashion’s sociological function. Elizabeth Wilson refers to Rene Konig’s The Restless Image:
Of all those who have written about fashion, Rene Konig has come as close as any to capturing its tantalizing and slippery essence. He sees fashion’s perpetual mutability, its “death wish,” as a manic defence against the human reality of the changing body, against ageing and death . . . fashion not only protects us from reminders of decay; it is also a mirror held up to fix the shaky boundaries of the psychological self.29

Certainly in Spica and his not-so-merrymakers’ practice of modeling themselves after Hals’s painting of 1616, Banquet of the Officers of the St. George Civic Company, in their discrepant habit of wearing military sashes—emblems of an antique honor—lies a type of mirror to shore up their raggedy and derivative identities. The structure of repetition effected by the painting, which, it seems, is always looming large in the background or insinuating itself into the side of the frame, is not unlike Lacan’s anamorphic ghosts; and as with Holbein’s skull in The Ambassadors or Dali’s soft watches, the painting and its mirroring on the part of the gangsters constitute the inside-out structure of the gaze where consciousness has an illusion of “seeing itself seeing itself.”30 The gangsters’ gazes are thereby caught flagrante delicto, as it were, in their desires for fullness and credibility of being.31

**Dutch Scopic Regime.** Because of Greenaway’s allusions to famous portrait and table paintings by Hals, Vermeer, and Rembrandt, among others, and his confounding of any sense of discrete traditions of painting, fashion, and film, the fashionably arrayed body is often presented as the figure; Greenaway has professed a subordinating of film’s frequently psychologized characterizations to painterly considerations of the figure, which, in his words, is also “a body, an object, a bulk, a form, a shape, something that throws light, makes the floorboards creak, indicates volume.”32 The historical connections between the Hals painting and the Greenaway players, then, would undoubtedly be extended by Greenaway the painter beyond the interpretive grid of overt character motivation. He has spoken of his interests in perspective in film and in what he calls the “classical ordering of the world.” “My framing is deliberately related to the Renaissance sense of a framed space, an organized space, a space which is . . . selected in order to make use of composition.”33

Greenaway’s Renaissance space is triumphantly accommodated to film through Sacha Vierny’s camerawork, quite different from his work for Alain Resnais, in which the panning of the camera, notes William F. Van Wert, always “devolves to a particular character’s point of view or memory.” Van Wert writes:

> It insists upon spatial configurations rather than character temporality . . . it accentuates the artificiality and theatricality of Greenaway’s narratives, and it is thus freed up from the constraints of following character and collapsing into point of view to do quite innovative things (like mobilize painterly tableaux and deal with issues of perspective in Dutch table paintings).34

Through the stately reticence of Vierny’s tracking camera, which, as Greenaway says, “is an inorganic eye, . . . not a subjective eye at all.”35 with practically no closeups, and with apparently as much time for kitchen tableaux vivants as for vil-

---

72 *Cinema Journal 35, No. 1, Fall 1995*
lainous deeds, the visual order is slightly de-eroticized, linking it thereby to the distant and disincarnate eye of Cartesian perspectivalism of the Renaissance. But Greenaway has also said of his painterly organizations in film,

My films could be better appreciated, better understood, if people applied the aesthetics of painting to them. A great delight is a concern for surface, in using two-dimensional organizations of objects across the screen as though they are three dimensional, a concern for the way in which objects shine, for the difference in textures. The restaurant, for example, is red, but it is many different types of red and they all interact, balancing one another.36

If, as Martin Jay argues in "Scopic Regimes of Modernity," the Cartesian perspectivalism of Italian painting is not quite as hegemonic as has been thought, and "the scopic regime [Christian Metz's term] of modernity [is] . . . characterized by a differentiation of visual subcultures, whose separation has allowed us to understand the multiple implications of sight in ways that are now only beginning to be appreciated,"37 then Greenaway's Renaissance space might certainly be seen as modulated by the Weltanschauung and subject positioning of the seventeenth-century Low Countries' scopic regime, summoned in the film by its Dutch painting frame of reference. Though the difference between "the art of describing," the title of Svetlana Alpers's important book on Dutch painting, and the "art of narrating" in Italian painting might be somewhat exaggerated, Alpers does make a strong case for the former being a discrete visual culture. She differentiates the two scopic regimes, Dutch and Renaissance (or Southern), respectively, in the following passage:

attention to many small things versus a few large ones; light reflected off objects versus objects modeled by light and shadow; the surface of objects, their colors and textures, dealt with rather than their placement in a legible space; an unframed image versus one that is clearly framed; one with no clearly situated viewer compared to one with such a viewer. The distinction follows a hierarchical model of distinguishing between phenomena commonly referred to as primary and secondary: objects and space versus the surfaces, forms versus the textures of the world.38

The Cook, the Thief, His Wife, and Her Lover clearly has an avid affiliation with the Dutch scopic regime, and this might help to explain why the mise-en-scène, including the costume designs, engages us literally to the point of distraction. Without the framing that hierarchizes circumbient materials, without the privileging of certain characters' points of view, and with such visual embarras de richesses, the spectator is at pains even to ascertain the dimensions of the restaurant, or, more essentially, to enlist as appropriate allegorical opprobrium the lustre of copper pots, the opalescence of fish scales, the beguiling richness of red. Gliding through the cavernous spaces of Le Hollandais, our vision is Faustian, succumbing to worldly pleasures while recoiling from the moral price they have exacted, slowly being swallowed by the alimentary canal of viscously, lushly monochromatic spaces (which portends perhaps the characters' swallowing each other). Sometimes distanced, watching from outside the decadent mise-en-spectacle, which is Greenaway the filmmaker's own conspicuous outrage, our vision and the

Cinema Journal 35, No. 1, Fall 1995 73
film's visualities are historically overdetermined and morally indeterminate. Be-fittingly, Martin Jay continues, the Dutch tradition "casts its attentive eye on the fragmentary, detailed, and richly articulated surface of the world it is content to describe rather than explain. Like the microscopist of the seventeenth century... Dutch art savors the discrete particularity of visual experience and resists the temptation to allegorize or typologize what it sees, a temptation to which... Southern (Renaissance) art readily succumbs."39

**Sartorial Satire.** At the very least, the valorization of material surfaces in seventeenth-century Dutch art is a good fit for the commodity fetishism of fashion.40 But if "Dutch" descriptiveness (of surfaces, textures) constitutes the film's visuality and our viewing of it, and if the Dutch preference for unassuming depiction of the different classes of its citizens in their natural environment, e.g., Vermeer's domestic interiors, as opposed to the symbolic portrayal of characters of biblical or mythological import, is somewhat at odds with Greenaway's allegorizing of late capitalism's evils (though this opposition is fraught indeed because so much of contemporary mythology is made up of the household clutter of consumer goods) and with his moral typologizing of characters (he indicated the four characters in the title represent certain vices and virtues), we must consider further the prominent Hals painting as point of coalescence between Greenaway's painterly allegory of class pretensions and consumerism run amok and Gaultier's sartorial expression of it.

The painting assumes an importance by virtue of its actual presence, that is, by its not being merely mobilized, or quoted, as the other Dutch paintings are, and this makes for a mutual measuring up of the Old Master's group portrait and those fashion slaves of Spica and company who imitate it. Though Gaultier's interpretations of the cavalier fashions worn by the officers are certainly not without their own flamboyance—and include a Spanish ruffled shirt, polka-dotted vest, and various ingenious arrangements of the military sash—there is nonetheless in the modernizing a comparative economizing, if you will, of ostentation. It is as if the gangsters responded more to what one fashion historian pertly referred to as the "wonderfully middle-class white-collar aspect" of the Dutch, inherited from the rigidity of Charles I's Spanish court, and less to the cavalier style, associated mainly with the French of the 1630s, of bucket-top boots, wide-brimmed plumed hats, lace, long hair, and lovelocks. As Valerie Steele explains, "Even Spain's bitterest enemies—like the protestant English and the rebellious Dutch—wore [rigid and austere] Spanish fashions. In fact, the Dutch really carried the Spanish style into the next century—transforming this conformist black-and-white uniform from a Catholic aristocratic and courtly mode into a Protestant, bourgeois, and urban style."41

As for the cultural history of this bourgeois style, epitomized by the immense, goffered cartwheel ruff that (literally) rose and fell over two centuries,42 the collapse of feudalism and the turmoil of the Reformation contributed to the emergence of the bourgeoisie in Europe, and a most prosperous one in Holland, where
the ruling class was made up of merchants and magistrates. Following the division of the Low Countries, when the southern part (the Spanish Netherlands) remained with the Hapsburg Empire, and Holland achieved independence, trade developed rapidly and the country became wealthier and began to dictate fashion.

Spica and his accomplices' imitation of the burgher class of Holland is a satire, then, of their leisure-class pretensions. Despite their conspicuous consumption, waste, leisure, and outrage, they cannot distance themselves from mercantilism and the middle class which Hals portrays. They fail on many counts; their ill-conceived homage shows them lacking in the humor which, as W. Bode in Great Masters of Dutch and Flemish Painting notes, was the keynote of Hals's portraits; "without troubling to reproduce small external details," that is, in capturing the Dutch personalities without recording the historical paraphernalia of Dutch accomplishment (i.e., without strident narrating), Hals nonetheless engages the spectator in the "animated, humorous expression which seems to be excited by another person, and therefore appeals so directly to the onlooker."\(^43\) Their predatory exploits are hardly the knight-errantry associated with their cavalier counterparts. They are hapless pretenders, thus kitsch offenders—like the fake silverware Spica snaps in half—because even their bourgeois class standing lacks utterly the highly individuated civic-minded integrity of their historical predecessors. Hals in fact was famous for showing us the Dutch as "a race with strong passions, highly developed egoism, but controlled and guided by a keen understanding, piety, and patriotism."\(^44\) Bode writes:

The earlier school of Dutch painting culminates in individual portraiture, which, in a certain way, takes the place of the historical picture. In the bitterness of the struggle for religious and political liberty against Catholic Spain, the Reformed Church had refused to tolerate any kind of pomp in the decoration of places of worship, and thus a crushing blow, which was long felt, was dealt to Church painting and even to religious painting. At the same time, throughout the struggle, the importance of the individual, and with this also his self-confidence, strongly developed. The burghers of the young Free State realized themselves as independent persons, as well as members of the numerous corporations, especially of the military guilds, where they were trained in the use of arms. Therefore the portrayal of the individual, and especially of the committees of those numerous guilds and various corporations, formed for public utility, seemed to them the most worthy task of art; their greatest artists devoted themselves to it. Among these artists Frans Hals enjoys the fame of having released the art of portraiture from all trammels, and brought Dutch painting, in this direction, to its first great period of excellence.\(^45\)

Spica and company in indiscriminately adopting "pecuniary canons of taste" cannibalize a past that ultimately indicts them. But, by the same token, the rumpled historicity of their attire is in itself conspicuously outrageous and therefore empowers the gastronomic gangsters, and as they own the restaurant, they to a large extent establish the prevailing sartorial morality. Of such (a)morality, one Veblenian critic writes, "we may expect to find in the social life of the owning
classes of our time the artificially elaborated remnants of original barbarian
tastes.”

The Cook, the Thief, His Wife, and Her Lover plays with the ambivalence we
often feel about fashion. No matter how well Gaultier’s costume designs
deconstruct, through his and Greenaway’s historical referencing, this morbidly
bourgeois group’s claims to social superiority, no matter how much Gaultier’s
reputation potentially “punx out” this black-clad and violent bourgeoisie (thereby
repudiating its own aspirations of upward mobility), the fashions cannot be sus-
tained as a class critique and completely serve the allegory of late capitalism’s
evils; they equivocate between enhancement and indictment just as the spectator
vacillates between (Dutch) description and (Renaissance) condemnation. More-
over, if the spectator recognizes the historical references to painting and fashion,
which contribute to Greenaway’s own conspicuous outrage, s/he is implicated in a
social superiority that the same history teaches could lead to Greenaway’s and, for
that matter, Veblen’s “barbarian culture,” in which culture is nothing but “a dis-
play of power, loot, and profit.” Fashion’s ravenous cycles of emulation of those
persons with some kind of prowess, be it economic or, in the case of punks, ideo-
logical, maraud through history’s closets to counter the mutability of the body, to
climb the social ranks. As Greenaway’s film demonstrates, in Veblen’s (admittedly
flawed) Darwinian model of social barbarism, it is fashion that adapts; it continu-
ally begets new fashion in an all-consuming present tense and, of course, consum-
ers themselves who, feeling as though they’ve eaten too much, are, nevertheless,
dressed to kill.

Notes
1. Ann Roth exemplifies the tradition of psychological realism in film costuming. Having
worked as costume designer for over sixty Hollywood films, including Midnight Cow-
boy, Klute, Coming Home, Nine to Five, Silkwood, Working Girl, The Mambo Kings,
and Wolf, she is “the antithesis of the legendary Hollywood costumers like Edith Head
who carefully shaped stars’ images for the studios.” Sidney Lumet says of her work,
“She refuses to take liberties with reality . . . Her clothes contribute to a revelation of
2. Elizabeth Wilson, Adorned in Dreams (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985),
132.
3. Robert Storr, “Unmaking History at the Costume Institute,” Art in America (February
4. Ibid., 19.
5. Wilson, Adorned in Dreams, 132.
1990), 86.
8. Ibid., 352. Savage further characterizes “England’s dreaming”: “It’s as though the na-
tion had been taken over by the spirit of Jack Warner—that embodiment of the post-
war consensus with his stoicism in the face of austerity and his homilies: ‘Mustn’t
grumble’: ‘Have another cup of tea.’ The collective forelock-tugging marks an accep-
tance of England’s stasis which the Punks totally reject” (359).
9. Fashion is said to have affected social hierarchies from its beginning, Valerie Steele in
Paris Fashion (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 19, writes: “The spread of fashion did not progress unimpeded, because it implicitly challenged the static and hierarchical nature of traditional society. Nevertheless, from the fourteenth century on, in both the courts and cities of Europe, there was an inexorable movement toward fashion-oriented behavior.”


11. One fashion critic describes a late eighties show thus: “the antics of stick-thin models shimmying in parodies of femininity guarantee roars of approval; tawdry transparent white blouses over black bras are greeted as great innovations; a dwarf and a fat girl parade the catwalk to catcalls and hoots of derisory laughter” (Wilson, Adorned in Dreams, 132).

12. Malcolm McLaren, idea man and promoter of the Sex Pistols and the ready-to-wear clothing boutique culture of England’s punk movement, has said recently: “The word ‘street’ has been redefined and talked about and applied, in Vogue ads, television commercials, Hollywood spectacles, television series, and so on, to the point that we don’t know what ‘street’ is, other than trying to look back and find some things that might expose an idea that those in the establishment haven’t been made aware of” (“Punk and History,” in Discourses: Conversations in Postmodern Art and Culture, ed. Russell Ferguson, William Olander, Marcia Tucker, Karen Fiss [Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990], 226).

13. “Blackwell’s worst-dressed list,” lamentably unprogressive, is a staple of Academy Award hype and People magazine, and Vanity Fair regularly presents profiles of artistic accomplishment or philanthropic largesse as precedents of chic.

14. Regarding fashion designers’ influence on the film industry, Elizabeth Wilson notes, “The influence of Hollywood is surprisingly difficult to pin down. Many movie costumes were necessarily somewhat outside fashion, because the producers feared that by the time the film was released, the costumes would look out of date. Nevertheless, despite the special requirements of such costumes, American producers (and stars) did commission clothing from Paris couturiers. Gloria Swanson was dressed by Chanel for her first ‘talkie,’ Tonight or Never (1931); Schiaparelli was hired to dress Mae West for Every Day’s a Holiday (although the dresses had to be refitted for the buxom star). Artists and Models Abroad (1937) featured dresses by Patou, Worth, Paquin, Schiaparelli, Maggy Rouff, Lanvin, and Alix, as well as Hollywood designers Edith Head and Travis Barton. But Hollywood’s real influence on fashion derived not from its dress designers but from the images of the stars themselves. Chanel might have put some of her clients into trousers, but for the general public the image of Marlene Dietrich in trousers was probably far more influential” (Wilson, Adorned in Dreams, 265).


17. “In 1623, Philip IV ordered the ruffs to be abandoned in favour of the simple white starched collar called a valona. This was open in front but at the sides and back was supported upon a card or stiffened material under-collar which was faced with silk; this was the golilla. The Spanish version was small and quite plain. When other nations had worn such an upstanding collar, it had been fashionable earlier, was larger and had been decoratively embroidered and trimmed with lace. Such a collar, worn chiefly 1600–20, was known in England as a whisk and in France as a col rotonde. In Spain, the valona style lasted until c. 1650 and the falling band was rarely to be seen” (Doreen Yarwood, Fashion in the Western World, 1500–1990 [New York: Drama Book Publishers, 1992], 39).

Cinema Journal 35, No. 1, Fall 1995 77

19. Jonathan Culler explains semiotics’ ahistoricism thus: “First, because looking for the logic of culture, semiotics proposes ‘structural’ explanation in place of historical and causal reconstruction, making explicit the interdependence of social phenomena on one another by analyzing them in terms of systems of relations . . . At the heart of the discourse is a belief only in the present. In this respect, semiotics is the scientific descendant of Paul Valery, who identified the present with sensation (‘Now, whatever is sensation is essentially present. There is no other definition of the present except sensation itself . . .’)” (On Signs, ed. Marshall Blonsky [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985], xx).


25. As for gender-specific styles, Gaultier is not exactly of the Edith Head “good taste” tradition, which is not to impute any general conservatism to Hollywood costume designers; they did know, in effect, how to subvert their own sumptuary laws—the Hays Code—when, so the argument goes, the censored plunging neckline was merely switched to the back, thereby featuring a “new” erogenous zone. But Gaultier’s designs are polymorphously perverse (in a way more fragmented than the film noir heroine’s transvestism) so not particularly suited to mainstream Hollywood’s interest in stabilizing the heterosexual couple. Though some remember the studio system’s actual gender differentiation differently: had it not been for Edith Head, one chronicler of Hollywood in the early thirties writes, “who firmly believed in feminine females and adorned them in flattering furbelows, Hollywood would have become an abode of Amazons” under the masculinizing influence of Adrian at Metro (Frances Marion, *Off with Their Heads! A Serio-Comic Tale of Hollywood* [New York: Macmillan Company, 1972], 243). Gaultier’s gender-bending clothes go way beyond shoulder pads, however, and, in a way that is defiantly and deconstructively historical, hark back to the Renaissance and before, when gender differentiation in dress was slight indeed.

26. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1953), 505. Veblen argues similarly, but in a way that is dated because it is too exclusively about women, when he writes that women have escaped the sphere of barbaric, predatory production only to be absorbed all the more entirely by the sphere of consumption—they become increasingly like commodities.

27. Prosper Montagne writes: “Literally, *entremets* means ‘between dishes.’ In old French the term covered the ensemble of dishes which followed the roast, and included not only sweets but also vegetables. In the fourteenth, fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, *entremets* meant not only food but also any kind of entertainment in the middle of the meal, provided by buffoons, minstrels, troubadours, acrobats, dancers and other performers. A special decor, often very elegant, was provided for this entertainment. This was made, not by cooks, but by special craftsmen and sometimes consisted of a papier mache fortress or some other edifice” (*Larousse Gastronomique* [New York: Crown Publishers, 1961], 402).


78 Cinema Journal 35, No. 1, Fall 1995

31. Also, the visual homonym provides a wry commentary on the conformism of fashion, as does, it could be argued, the oppressively monochrome rooms and the chameleonlike color changing of certain characters' clothes in moving through them; in matching the green kitchen and red dining room, and in becoming a sort of photographic negative of themselves in the toilets, it would seem the habitués of Le Hollandais are as fashion conscious as Spica and his retinue. (The most notable exception is Michael the Lover, whose incessant reading associates him with a leisure class the hoodlums are trying in vain to emulate. But of course the fact that he remains in brown right through the culinary presentation of his [bastet] body would seem to indicate that all classes—and all criminals and all dandies—are susceptible to fashion imperatives.)


33. Ibid.

34. William F. Van Wert, "The Cook, the Thief, His Wife, and Her Lover (review)," *Film Quarterly* 44, no. 2 (1990–1991): 45.

35. McFarlane, "Peter Greenaway," 44.

36. Ibid.


39. Jay, "Scopic Regimes of Modernity," 13. There is a third scopic regime, the Baroque, more distinct from the Mediterranean and the Dutch than they are from each other, associated historically with the Counter Reformation mystics' submission to vertiginous experiences of rapture.

40. Gaultier's cachet has a stake in fetishized surfaces because, unlike the classical profile, which entails the Grecian or Roman respect for natural bodily contours in dress, his eighties designs are often deceptive, strenuous, as autonomous as armor; his missile-tit velvet bras—for men and women—his bodysuits with giant zippers, while exposing flesh—or its readiness—in games of "cache-cache," render the body an event of de-construction, of the piracy of erotic depth through the conspiracy of surfaces.


42. Doreen Yarwood writes: "The Dutch, for instance, clung to the type of neckwear which had characterized their dress since the 1580's and continued to wear the enormously wide white ruffs. These were plain, quite undecorated, and were goffered in narrow gauge but were of such a large diameter that they swayed and dipped over the shoulders. Such ruffs were more typical of feminine dress than masculine and women were also noted for the infinite variety of caps—plain or ornamented—which they wore. Sometimes more than one was worn, one on top of the others, each set further back on the head . . . After 1630 both men and women wore falling ruffs for some time before they adopted the generally fashionable falling band" (*Fashion in the Western World*, 27).

43. W. Bode, *Great Masters of Dutch and Flemish Painting*, trans. Margaret L. Clarke (London: Duckworth and Co., 1909), 35. William F. Van Wert suggests another possible reason for the Hals painting: "Hals himself represents both Spica and what Spica might have been, had he been successful in his attempts to purchase class. Hals is depicted in art history books as an insatiable drinker, a dissolute and ungovernable hedonist, who caused the death of his first wife by beating her, then had ten children by a
second wife. The need to feed that many children forced Hals to be prolific" ("The
Cook, the Thief, His Wife, and Her Lover," 47). But Jakob Rosenberg and Seymore
Slive write:

Attempts have been made to determine [Hals's] way of life by identifying him
with the jolly toppers he painted. The method is not foolproof . . . In 1718
Houbraken wrote that Hals was usually drunk every evening. Subsequent biog-
raphers embroidered this theme and by the end of the nineteenth century Hals
was accused of being a wife-beater as well as a chronic alcoholic. It is true that a
Frans Hals was summoned before the burgomasters of Haarlem in 1616 for
drunkenness and beating his wife, but the authorities admonished a Frans
Cornelisz. Hals, a weaver, not Frans Fransz. Hals the painter. Moreover, Hals was
a widower in 1616 and did not have a wife to beat. His first wife, Annetje
Harmansdr., died in 1615, and he was left with two children.

Hals seems to have held a respectable place in his community. His membership
in the St. George Militia Company was a sign of some prestige . . . And, most
important, from the beginning to the end of his career he was commissioned to
make group portraits of militia companies and regents of charitable institutions,
as well as portraits of distinguished Dutch theologians, university professors, civic
leaders, artists and merchants. It was the same kind of clientele that patronized
Rembrandt. (Dutch Art and Architecture: 1600–1800 [Middlesex, England: Pen-
guin Books Ltd., 1987], 54, 55)

44. Bode, Great Masters of Dutch and Flemish Painting, 35, 36.
45. Ibid., 34, 35.