

## Introduction

### *The (co-)Motion of Aesthetics from France to the Middle East*

The ideas of exchange, of devaluation,  
of inflation invaded his book little  
by little like theories of dress crept  
into Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* – where  
they usurped the place of characters.

*André Gide (1986)*

Hossein Chalayan is a London-based fashion designer who is well known for his avant-garde cutting edge seasonal collections. For the spring 1998 collection seven models presented his creations. While the first model was wearing *only* an eye mask, those who followed her came on the catwalk gradually covered, starting with the head. The seventh model came out fully covered in black<sup>1</sup>. Her dress was a clear reference to the Middle Eastern black *chador* and *niqab*.

This text is a story of the intertwined play of the real and imaginary, of promise and the actual, of desire and fulfillment, of value and over-value. How could it have been otherwise, since fashion and body were the focus of my gaze? If one watched the sun long enough, one would start seeing light-spots of questionable materiality. Does this make them less real, since we do see them, *even with our eyes closed*? When one watches a person, one first sees the dress. But if a naked model walks on a catwalk (as happened in Hossein Chalayan's collection), one also sees the dress, or its immaterial promise. Nonetheless, the promise and its fulfillment do not

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1 With deep thanks to Jean Philippe Pons for this, and much other, information.

always coincide. The context of Chalayan's show prepared the public for a fashion presentation. While the context made it a fashion presentation, the final dress – a 'simple' *chador* – was imaginarily assimilated to a non-modern space, the Islamic Middle East. The process of presentation was part of the fashion's industry conventions. Was the outcome 'less' fashion?

The following pages propose an exploration of the world of fashion in two apparently opposite places: Paris, the recognized capital of chic, and Tehran, a city that hardly makes one think of fashion. If anything at all, Tehran and fashion seem to be mutually exclusive. The two-year research, between 2002 and 2004, taught me otherwise. Important ethnographic moments<sup>2</sup> in Paris occurred while presenting my research to different people during small conversations. The mention of fashion and Tehran prompted strong reactions. There was the condescending or doubting smile, usually accompanied by "is there such a thing as fashion in Tehran?!" This was the reaction of a significant majority. The juxtaposition of non-western places (Iran) and modern practices (fashion) disturbed what Bourdieu would call the *doxa* of these persons, their unquestionable, taken for granted, conviction referring to geography, clothing, and modernity. For many, fashion – the herald industry of Paris and the unspoken mark of modernity – could not be conceived as having a significant association with Tehran. The loss of sense is partly linked with the imaginary movement of a practice from one place to another (or to the apparent impossibility of this mental move, for that matter). Clearly, fashion does exist in

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2 I use the term "ethnographic moment" in the sense that Marilyn Strathern gives it (personal communication), that is, a moment usually accidental, which may last no more than one second, or the time of a short dialogue exchange, but which has a tremendous explanatory power for the social situation in which one may find herself.

Tehran, both as a creative practice and as a practice of consumption. As Susan Ossman observes “[m]oving from one world to another might turn the “significant” into “nonsense”, but it could also introduce changes in both. Worlds are constantly in the process of sharing, copying, critiquing, and altering each other’s values and meanings” (Ossman 2002:138-139). These processes are mostly overlooked in the effort to create and emphasize difference, and to accentuate identitary landmarks – prompted in illusory identity discourses (Bayart 1996). Through looking at fashion in Paris and Tehran, this text is less interested in “essential” differences between the two locations, and more in the reciprocal processes of sharing, critiquing, and altering the signification of fashion. It also proposes an analysis of this phenomenon through ethnological eyes, which at the end makes place to politically significant conclusions.

Today, while Paris appears in the news only as the site of endless political dispute between a shaky left and a populist right, Tehran is the focus of attention: deemed one of the centers of the Axis of Evil by the US president Bush, and as if to confirm the fear alimmented through media channels, Tehran allegedly aims to become a military nuclear power. Iran will surely be a civil nuclear power in shortest delay. In the attempt to export democracy by means of sanctified bullets and blessed bombs, at only two years distance, Bush administration opened fronts both in Afghanistan and in Iraq. Any pretext was used to justify military action. I happened to be in Tehran in March-April 2003, when Baghdad fell and Bush declared victory from a US carrier in the Persian Gulf. In Tehran, the feelings where split. Historical enemy, Saddam Hussein was not deplored in Iran. However, many lips whispered in those moments: “we are next”. Ever since, a feeling of helpless expectation transpired in my conversations with friends in Tehran. And in many political and media discourses, beyond the nuclear ambitions of

a presumed fundamentalist government in Tehran, the ultimate argument for the necessity of military intervention stays women's black dress, the *chador*. Simultaneously, dress of fashionable young Iranian women and men are presented as heralds of resistance against Ahmadinejad's government, and implicitly support of any American or Western action against Tehran. Beyond theories and descriptions, the following pages analyze the roots of this simplified (and erroneous) assumption in an attempt to shed more shades of colour on a black and white picturing of the world.

Fashion creates material objects (dress) invested with significations that, in turn, create a certain discursive, always already imaginary, order in the social body; ethnological research creates and objectifies experiences, puts them on a material support (tapes, photography, notes) and reorders them into a more or less coherent theory, advancing hypotheses, reorganizing the discourses in, and about, social space. The fulfillment of desire is the promise of fashion, and the possibility of writing is the promise of fieldwork. A fashion brand name does not secure us against the disappointment that the actual wearing may cause. And any fashionable dress is ultimately disappointing, since it does not magically transport us into the realm of pleasure it promises. The ethnographic material produced during the research cannot possibly guarantee the satisfaction of well-written material. Buying a dress and writing are somehow a similar bet, one never knows how dress re-creates one's body, nor how writing reorganizes one's thinking. And finally this written material, this discursive reorganization of experience takes the place of the fieldwork experience itself, re-evaluates it, along with the time lived through it, as dress takes the place of the bodies that inhabit it; in fact, those bodies cannot be read otherwise but through dress, they are made real by their coverings, or rather

by the value and signification we attach to those coverings. The complex anatomy of the field is knowable only through the written pieces, through the disposition of signs that in their turn re-create the field.

During the time of my research, my body moved between two sites, Paris and Tehran, covering a wide range of urban spaces and giving them new significations. It is not without importance that I knew Paris well before my fieldwork, while Tehran was an entirely new discovery. My previous knowledge of Paris was a bodily one; I experienced living in this city at repeated intervals starting 1997. Tehran was for me a story told by members of the Iranian diaspora in Southern California, a story that made me curious and eager to see and explore it. The story was not told only through words, but mostly through bodily expression. The particular elegance and care of the self of Californian Iranians drew my attention ever since I became acquainted with the community. My Iranian friends always had a particular style, fashionable dress, up to date hairstyle, and concern for displaying brand names (on their bodies, or attached to their persona, e.g. designers' signatures clothes, or car brands). Nothing surprising, maybe, but all these made me want to see the urban landscape in Tehran.

With this baggage of *a priori* knowledge I installed myself in Paris in the summer of 2002, and I alternated between the two cities until the Fall of 2003. Nevertheless, the experience was deeply unbalanced: in Paris I lived a punctual existence, constituted through meeting certain people, listening to their stories, and recording their impression about Middle Eastern clients in the fashion world. I strove to understand the functioning of the fashion industry and its relation to the Middle East. The process of designing along with the channels of communication and distribution of commodities were the focus of my interests. Secrecy proved to be an unbreakable

barrier, so exact numbers regarding fashion markets are absent. The question of copyright reverberated through almost all the interviews and pushed me to rethink the myth of authorship.

On the other hand, Tehran offered me, through fashion practices, the image of the whole. This may be the normal result of my methodological approach: in Paris I looked for specific issues, armed with my targeted gaze, while in Tehran I was open to a variety of experiences. Being directed by my emergent interests I was also trying to understand everything that was happening around me, so I mixed my observations on fashion with the discovery of a previously unknown urban space.

In both locations I closely followed the process of clothing creation. I was interested in the techniques of producing the material dress, since dress and body are in a symbiotic relationship. As my own body moved between Paris and Tehran, I was forced to acknowledge changes in conceptions of socially acceptable habits, postures, and, closely related to them, dress. In Paris, considering the density of population and scarcity of space, the body has to be more restrained; in the metro, one has to sit straight, often with legs crossed in order to leave more space for others. People from Tehran have much more space at their disposition. However, gender distinction prescribes bodily postures in Iran: men do not have any social restrictions concerning their body postures, at least in public spaces<sup>3</sup>. Thus, in Tehran, even if men and women share a small space, e.g. a common taxi, men tend to occupy the entire seat, and leave little space for their female seatmates.

In both locations I have observed a striking correspondence between body postures and clothing. Paris ready-to-wear features a large choice of clothing items that are close to the body, centered,

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3 For a discussion of public bodily postures, see Shahshahani, in press.

reducing the space between the textile and the anatomy itself. There is a shift towards this kind of fashion in Tehran's public spaces that I will discuss later, but the general rule is that clothes tend to be a little larger, for both men and women, obscuring the contours of the body.

I was also swept into this bodily dynamic as I moved between Paris and Tehran. Newly arrived in Tehran, I was trying to give others as much space as I could on the seats of public transportation. By the end of my second sojourn I surprised myself trying to occupy more space, spreading rather than restraining myself on the seat of the taxi.

During my first sojourn in Tehran I went to a tailor in order to have a pair of trousers made. Although I came with a model, European-made trousers, I was unable to convince the tailor to make the pants tighter than he did. That is, from my perspective, at the seat of the pants the fabric exceeds largely the shape of my anatomy. Ultimately, he argued that this is "the model", and he could not do anything about it. I felt that my body had lost its shape. This first hand experience made me think about the architecture and the environment. Contours and shapes create our field of visibility, and obviously I experienced a major change between Paris and Tehran.

The drabness of the streets in Tehran reminded me of the communist period in Romania, when colors were banned from daily use, and buildings were gray and dirty. I remember the words of some French ethnologists discussing their first impression of Bucharest, in the early nineties. In their account, there was a constant impression of a lack of contours, of defined shapes and separation lines. The poverty in the range of colors was mainly responsible for this sensation. Similarly, my notes on my first arrival in France in the mid-nineties describe the clarity of contours and the visible sepa-

ration between asphalt and bare ground in the countryside. I had a contrasting impression to France at my arrival in Tehran. I noticed a lack of defined contours, of both buildings and bodies. In fact, some of the middle-aged women whom I interviewed told me that the trend toward weight gain among the Tehranian population dates to after the Islamic Revolution and the imposition of *manto* or *roopoosh* (overcoat compulsory for women in Tehran's exterior spaces, see Chapter 4). The everyday use of large shapeless dresses, I was told, lessens one's awareness of one's body shape, thus losing the shape itself. This is not, however, true for everybody, as many young women from Tehran display a refreshing urban style with tight overcoats (*manto*), and talk about maintaining their weight, the gym halls they frequent, and the diets they try to follow.

The relationships among architecture, living space, dress, and the bodies that inhabit them is the starting point of my reflections on fashion. Through the observations summarized above, it came to my attention that the relationships I am talking about are far from being unidirectional. That is, dress (and similarly, architecture) is not designed for a pre-existing type of body, no more than bodies adapt blindly to those designs. Thus, the large clothes worn by women in Tehran were eventually "filled" by the bodies that gained weight and at the same time, newer, tighter styles are coupled with preoccupations with fitness and dieting. In Paris, fit bodies, contained attitudes, and tight dresses are coexistent, but it is hard to say which came first.

First chapter of the book positions the theoretical approach on fashion and subject formation. It briefly summarizes previous theoretical approaches on fashion, and it proposes a furthering of analysis with tools provided by anthropological approaches on body and subjectivity. The second part of the chapter is dedicated to the question of methods. This entire theoretical chapter is written for a

specialized audience, and may be easily skipped without lessening the book's content.

Second chapter describes fashion production as Parisian young designers (*createurs*) see it. A brief overview of fashion industry opens the chapter, positioning the *createur* in the political economy of fashion. Fashion production practices point to the creation of the all too changing aesthetics of fashion, and to their underlying canons. Technical constraints such as fabric texture, and standardization of sizes participate actively in the processes of creation. Dress is not necessarily the embodiment of a designer's unique vision, but the result of a series of procedures that imply the concurrence of multiple agencies. The question of exoticism in fashion appears when categorizations of styles are discussed. Styles borrow names mainly from historical epochs or decades, and from geographic locations. The association of styles with geographic locations gives birth to an aesthetic mapping of the world that borrows from fashion characteristics: seasonal changes and fluidity encounter the relative fixity of aesthetic canons. One may observe how geographical stereotypes emerge and are simultaneously questioned in dress creation dynamic. Fashion appears as space organizer.

Time is another dimension discussed in the process of dress production. At first presented as a technological constrain, time appears both as organizer of fashion industry, and as organized by it. Divided into seasons, shared between fashion glamorous presentations and sales period, fashion's time is both anticipatory and passé, but it never seems to concern the present. Anticipation of trends is a mark of distinction both among designers and among consumers. Access to styles "ahead of time" becomes a mechanism of distinction in the fashion/class system. Chapter 2 finishes with reflections on the relation between fashion, time, and body, which analyze the emergence of a new type of subjectivity: the *brand* subjectivity.

Chapter 3 looks at the links between fashion industry and the Middle East in two manners. First, the text presents the mode of construction of Middle Eastern exotic imaginary present in certain fashion trends. After recounting a specific career trajectory of a designer from Paris who proposes “Oriental” collections, the text moves on to designers who have a direct contact with Middle Eastern clients. Their practices of production and sales bring up specific modes of imagining and constructing an “ideal-type” of Middle Eastern fashion customer. Designers and fashion professionals (some of whom are of Middle Eastern origins) have a variety of opinions regarding the Middle Eastern clients. However, these clients’ patterns of buying indicate to fashion professionals a certain mode of relating to brand names. The relation with brand names turns out to have moral undertones, especially if we look at how different uses of prestigious brand names also mark Western subcultures like “the chavs”.

Some selling showrooms in Paris are seasonally created to accommodate Middle Eastern clients (see also chapter 5). Descriptions of the “ideal-type” of Middle Eastern client from fashion professionals perspective offers the possibility to revisit Orientalism, and to reflect on the role of dress and fashion in organizing space and creating subjectivities. Taking into account clients’ preferences for conservative or avant-garde fashion, and re-considering stereotypes about Middle East, Parisian fashion designers venture to characterize the mode of spatial organization in the places of clients’ origins. An analysis of space and political organization along the lines of visibility ends this chapter. This analysis reopens the question of public and private, and masculine and feminine from the standpoint of scopic surveillance.

Chapter 4 introduces fashion practices in Tehran. The questions of space and time are discussed in a different social setting.

The chapter opens with a short history of dress reforms in Iran, starting with the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century. The present period is characterized by new forms of spatial segregation introduced or accentuated by the Islamic regime, and their reflection in dress habits. Different dress styles indeed mark different spaces, but not along the simplified line of public and private, a system in which the public would be pervaded by Islamic rules of dress, while the private would be “free”. In fact, the empirical observations show an interlaced structure of different spaces, class organization, ideas of citizenship based on personal empowerment, and the presence of different agents and degrees of surveillance that traverses all urban spaces in Tehran. Women’s spatial mobility rather than an abstract idea of freedom turns out to be a better explanatory category, and a mark of modernity. Advancing the idea that modernity has a specific repertoire reflected by fashion, Tehran appears as an urban space with a specific regime of modernity. This idea is sustained by the last part of the chapter that discusses time and consumption. Fashion’s specific organization of time intersects other timeframes, such as the Iranian New Year, or Islamic Republic’s holidays and celebrations. This gives birth to a particular timeframe that does not oppose a modern (fashion) and a traditional (celebration) time, but constructs a specific calendar, not more nor less modern than let us say a Parisian’s timeframe. A short presentation of the networks of fashion commodities circulation shows the practical way of synchronizing styles between Paris and Tehran.

A showroom in Paris and a fashion public presentation in Tehran illustrate the mirroring images that fashion practices construct. A sumptuous fashion show in Tehran offers an image of how Western practices of fashion presentation are re-interpreted in Tehran, and how certain elements of the modern repertoire are critiqued and developed with this occasion. A select Parisian showroom reunites

twice a year avant-garde designers who show their collections for sale exclusively to Middle Eastern clients. Showroom's spatial organization and its policies for personnel selection are as many expressions of interpreting spatial and sex segregating practices in Middle East. These images are arranged face to face in chapter 5.

Chapter 6 returns to Tehran for a presentation of high-fashion practices in this city. Three designers' careers illustrate different understanding of fashion. Along these presentations, ideas about modernity, tradition, and the West are reworked along the lines of designers' aesthetic approaches. In the process of designing, body mobility reappears in the center of these stylists' preoccupations. The dynamic of class system based on access to fashion becomes evident. The connection between Western sensibilities and high classes in Tehran is re-worked through the observations on the status of Iranian traditional aesthetics. Dress inspired by traditional clothing is at high esteem among the privileged classes in Tehran. Chapter 6 sketches a map of the formation of taste and circulation of desire cross-class and cross-borders. In this dynamic access to Western taste and desires rather than Western dress informs high-class subjectivities in Tehran.

Chapter 7 offers an overview of the intersection of fashion practices and legal spaces through the lenses of copyright laws and attitudes towards authorship in the two cities. A short historical background of copyright and licensing practices in Paris reveal the importance of practices that preceded and informed the legal space pertinent to fashion industry. The legal spaces of the two cities differ in the regulations regarding copyrights. Nonetheless, authorship practices reveal similar approaches. Tehran's designers find themselves in a position of inferiority when competing on the international market. Many times their work is not endowed with authorship qualities, only because it originates in a place that is associated

with lack of originally-designed dress. Fashion practices in Western hemisphere operate as if an overarching anonymous “tradition” is the “author” of Tehran designed dress. Fashion practices reveal the power relations associated with the meaning of “authorship”.

Fashion photography is the focus of the last chapter of this book. Photography is a representation of an ideal type of body; in Tehran, fashion photography, as it is now, meets a series of regulations concerning women’s bodies’ representations. Interviews with fashion photographers in Tehran, and observations in two photography studios reveal the contested meanings of women’s mobility in the specific spatial and social structures of Iran. When compared with historical changes of regulations for women’s bodies’ presence in public, the contemporary requirements of the Islamic regime have a striking similarity with older meanings of a modern woman’s body in Iran.

The conclusion reconsiders the way in which fashion practices reflect subject formations in the two sites of the study. The meaning of modernity in Iran and in France is revisited, putting subject formation practices at the center of the analysis. Thus, the Iranian modernity and its link with the Islamic political organization are revealed not as a contradictory relationship but as an intertwined existence, in which one does not exclude the other.

