

**PRODUCING 'BRITISHNESS':  
GLOBALISATION AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF NATIONAL IDENTITY  
IN BRITISH FASHION**

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## ABSTRACT

British fashion is poised amidst a clutch of conflicting narratives, representations and ideologies. Through an examination of these rival encounters and the events that have gone to generate them, this thesis gives an insight into the culture of contemporary fashion, its dilemmas and the industry it supports.

In particular, my discussion looks at the relationship between fashion and national identity. It posits fashion as a site central both to the re-branding of Britain and also to contestations over British identity itself, including the gendering of Britishness and its class relations.

Using the cases of two iconic British fashion companies, Paul Smith Ltd and Mulberry Plc, I explore how the apparently straightforward and economically driven process of the globalisation of British fashion is, in fact, a far more culturally nuanced and locally embedded encounter than has previously been suggested. I unpack the different ways in which Paul Smith and Mulberry go about negotiating and sometimes even shaping and mobilising a sense of nationness in what is a rapidly globalising commercial marketplace. For in spite of their shared iconic national status both companies go about generating and deploying their self-confessed British character in exceedingly different ways.

It is through an exploration of Paul Smith and Mulberry's contrasting corporate strategies, symbolic production techniques and product profiles that I investigate the different meanings afforded by the term Britishness. Indeed the thesis contends that, in the arena of fashion, Britishness is characterised less through some distinct essence or by a particular 'look' and more through its 'narratives of ambiguity'. In turn, it suggests that an understanding of these narratives goes some way in problematising and disrupting commonly imagined notions of Britishness borne out of Anglo-centric, androcentric and bourgeois tradition and, still further, it looks at how such notions might be re-worked in more multiple and complex ways.

## AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I declare that the work in this thesis was carried out in accordance with the regulations of Cheltenham and Gloucester College of Higher Education and is original except where indicated by specific reference in the text. No part of the thesis has been submitted as part of any other academic award. The thesis has not been presented to any other educational institution in the United Kingdom or overseas.

Any views expressed in the thesis are those of the author and in no way represent those of the college.

Signed:...

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ALG  
Spalding, March 2001

## CHAPTER ONE

### All Change Aboard the Fashion Express!

#### Part One

#### Pattern Cutting: Laying out the thesis and marking out the themes

##### 1.1 Viv Rules UK! Introducing Vivienne Westwood, introducing British fashion

So, just what is this thing called 'British fashion'? From Peter York's 'punk and pageantry' to Michael Frayn's 'herbivores and carnivores' the schizophrenic nature of all things 'British' is frequently - and hotly - debated. When we turn to one of British fashion's most notorious designers of contemporary years - Vivienne Westwood - the remarkably varied and often contradictory character of the national fashion scene begins to surface. Even the briefest of biopics on Vivienne Westwood, chief executive and creative genius to an internationally revered couture empire, provides a fascinating account which runs the gamut of fashion, from jarringly subversive 1970s street styles, to latter day creations which bookishly borrow from fine tailoring and craft traditions. De la Haye (1996:208) summarises, "Westwood's career has turned full-circle from anti-establishment to exponent of British heritage and craftsmanship". Through Westwood's different incarnations we are introduced to the complexities of British fashion and the industry with which it is involved. In particular, Westwood supplies us with a powerful critique of British national identity and, through her clothes and her evolving personal philosophy, she also commentates on the future direction of 'Britishness' and the shape and form that it should take.

I vividly remember the first time I came across one of Vivienne Westwood's designs at an exhibition in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London in 1996. On display was

Westwood's 'Watteau' dress (figure 1), a stunning emerald-coloured evening gown made of shot silk and trimmed with lilac taffeta, taken from the 'Les Femmes' collection



*Figure 1: Vivienne Westwood's 'Watteau' gown from her 'Les Femmes' collection of spring/summer 1996. The dress is typical of Westwood's style: flamboyant, sharply tailored and illustrative of her own knowledge of, and interest in, historical costume. The Watteau dress has since become an icon of contemporary British fashion and, amongst other things, was the chief publicity image for 'The Cutting Edge' exhibition (see section 1.5), a celebration of defining moments in British fashion during the late twentieth century.*

(spring/summer, 1996). As with other collections, Westwood was inspired by Jean Antoine Watteau's paintings of the early eighteenth century and sought to adapt and interpret the featured costume of the Rococo period within her own creations (Ash, 1992). For me, the resulting gown, breathtaking in colour, shape and form, was an unforgettable baptism into the flamboyance and theatre of the fashion world. The acres of fabric that went to make the dress, together with the sophisticated historical

references that were its inspiration, created an incredibly dramatic effect, despite the rather subdued setting of the dimly lit museum gallery. Vivienne Westwood's Watteau gown typified my own (rather simplistic) idea of what haute couture looked like - breathtakingly elegant, stylish and exquisitely crafted.

Here then, it is possible to see how Vivienne Westwood, with her flair for dramatic tailoring and razor-sharp cut, has risen to the ranks of a Grade One designer, listed alongside the likes of Chanel and Valentino (Mulvagh, 1998). The Watteau dress was a grand exercise in copybook couture, exemplifying all the conventions of high fashion and its dictums on elegance, femininity and attention to quality. It is through such contributions to the fashion establishment and alongside her many other finely crafted collections, that Westwood has received wide recognition from her industry both nationally and internationally. For example, in 1990 and 1991 consecutively, Vivienne Westwood was named British Fashion Designer of the Year by the British Fashion Council. In December 1992, Westwood was presented with an OBE for services to creative industry and in 1998 Vivienne Westwood Ltd was awarded the Queen's Award for Export in recognition of the company's growing overseas market. In the same year, Westwood also became the first designer to be honoured at the Moët & Chandon Fashion Tribute, set up to honour "a leading light from the world of fashion whose creativity and vision of the way we dress has had a profound influence on our lifestyle" (Vivienne Westwood PR pack, 1998).

To a large degree, then, the dominant story surrounding Westwood of recent years is one of highly celebrated icon of the British fashion establishment. Her commercial empire goes from strength to strength, with the new flagship store having opened on

Conduit Street, in the heart of London's couture quarter. Westwood's limited company comprises four labels: the Gold Label, producing garments in the tradition of haute couture; the Red Label, a diffusion line<sup>1</sup>; MAN, the Vivienne Westwood menswear collection, and Anglomania, a casualwear line launched in spring/summer 1998. However alongside the success and esteem marked out by these trophies lies another set of narratives that begin to complicate this story and that reveal Vivienne Westwood's position amongst the fashion élite to be an uneasy, and even unwelcome, presence.

At once described as a "British legend" and the "dame of British fashion" (Hall, 1997) Vivienne Westwood is a national icon and household name famed for being a cornerstone of the national fashion industry. However, simultaneously, Westwood also bears the brunt of much derision and mockery and her high fashion statements are frequently a subject of ridicule, being branded by the media as "immature", "irritating" and "idiotic" (Bayley, 1998: 14) - a sentiment which also translates to the woman herself, with her headline-grabbing, heretical and brash behaviour, she has been described as "the barmy one...a gently tragic character" (Garfield, 1998: 6). Westwood thinks nothing of sending models down the catwalk in gold lamé, ten-inch platform heels or flesh-coloured tights adorned with only the briefest of fig-leaf logos. Off the catwalk she herself wears transparent lace dresses to royal engagements and frequently flashes provocative underwear to the world's press (Vermorel, 1996), all of which adds to her image of creative eccentric and oddball genius.

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<sup>1</sup> This term refers to the slightly cheaper, 'more wearable' collections that are increasingly produced by designers. Diffusion lines, along with cosmetics, fragrances and accessories provide the revenue for designers to support their more unusual and elaborate couture creations. The most widely celebrated examples of designer diffusion lines are those sold at Debenhams, a national department store chain once known as "the fashion equivalent of Siberia" (Brampton, 1998a: 54) but now boasting diffusion collections by such fashion heavyweights as Lulu Guinness, Philip Treacy, Pearce Fionda, Ben de Lisi, Jasper Conran and Maria Grachvogel.

From these examples it is possible to at least begin to see the paradoxical narratives that surround Vivienne Westwood. We see her as both a highly professional national figurehead, producing beautiful, chic and inspirational clothing for men and women, but at the same time, there is another much more anarchic and deeply non-conformist discourse running through her work which goes to challenge this. As Bayley (1998: 14) observes,

"Westwood is a raw genius of outrage, the Peter Greenway of fashion. She has a lot of taste, all of it bad. Her technique is to oppose flourishes of historicist baroque extravagance, impossibly impractical wild swags, slashed bodices, over-stuffed codpieces, wobbly platforms, drapes and intoxicating textures, against an obscenely cruddy street grunge of ripped tights, fag-ends and rivets". (Bayley, 1998: 14)

The anarchic, and often condemned, behaviour surrounding Westwood becomes ever more apparent when we delve further into her history. Westwood, the brains behind the wonderfully graceful Watteau gown, preceded her couture career in the erotic, outspoken and deeply sexualised worlds of 1970s fetishistic clothing and punk. Born in Glossop, Derbyshire in 1941, the daughter of a factory worker and greengrocer, Vivienne Westwood began designing in 1971, using her shop (later to be renamed 'Sex') on London's King's Road, (itself a location central on the style maps of working-class, subcultural and streetwear [Polhemus, 1994; Tucker 1998]) as a showcase for her ideas. It was here that, in collaboration with her partner, Malcolm McLaren<sup>2</sup>, she sold rubberwear, bondage gear and obscene t-shirts, most famously being prosecuted for the sale of pornographic images and assuming infamy with the likes of her 'God Save Myra Hindley' tops (Davey, 1999). Vivienne Westwood's confrontational streetwear and

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<sup>2</sup> McLaren was an icon of the British fashion and London subcultural scene in his own right. Indeed some argue that he was the force behind much of Westwood's success and certainly wielded considerable influence over Westwood's turn to punk, pseudo-porn and her stylistic

explicitly counter-British style, the biker gear, razor blade accessories and references to Satanism, have marked her out as a leading influence in 1970s subculture and the development of punk. Her endorsement of this subversive lifestyle and her contribution to a world that celebrates profanity and irreverence is a far cry from the disciplined and highly regulated spaces of the fashion salon and boutique. As Hebdige (1979: 19) argues,

"No subculture has sought with more grim determination than the punks to detach itself from the taken-for-granted landscape of normalized forms, nor to bring upon itself such vehement disapproval". (Hebdige, 1979: 19)

Westwood's determination to subvert the lores and codes of cultural hegemony, is, however, by no means locked away in her past. Indeed, it is the very fact that the legacy of Vivienne Westwood's colourful and controversial past continually emerges in all manner of guises that still further complicates our understanding of the fashion scene and Westwood's role within it. Whilst Vivienne Westwood is remembered as yesterday's "queen of punk" (Davey, 1999: 112) she also very actively continues to draw on her experiences of rebellion and resistance to inform her designs and collections today. Perhaps most pertinent here is the idea that Vivienne Westwood's creations, by her own admission, are always extremely 'sexualised'. For example, if I return to Westwood's Watteau dress (figure 1), we see that the undercurrents to this piece, with its suggestively nipped waist and sexy, strapless bodice, make veiled references to an eroticised passion which Westwood has deliberately set against the formalised conventions of eighteenth century courtship (Ash, 1992; de la Haye, 1996).

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campaigns against the establishment. A maverick entrepreneur and music aficionado, he is most known for forming the epoch-making band, The Sex Pistols.

What I believe we are seeing here, in Vivienne Westwood's translation from "spiky, razor-haired punkette to mature parody" (Bayley, 1998:14), is evidence of the jumbled and confused voices that go a considerable way in making up British fashion. By delving into Westwood's career, it becomes increasingly apparent that her progression from 'sidewalk to catwalk' is by no means a straightforward 'coming of age'. Rather, Vivienne Westwood has cleverly selected and then scrambled signs and symbols taken from all manner of different spaces and in so doing, she reveals that her early days spent in stylish rebellion still continue to have significant resonance in the excesses and fantastical designs of her contemporary commercial empire. In 1998, for example, Westwood's autumn/winter collection was said to have "plundered her own archives" (Barron, 1998b: 10), unleashing onto the terribly chic Italian catwalks, sparkling lurex, raw cut edges and bondage trousers in tartan denim - all direct signposts to the culture of punk with its canonising of rips and tears and the appropriation of "humble objects" encoded with secret subordinate meanings (Hebdige 1979:18). Barron (1998b: 10), writing at Milan Fashion Week, further articulated the fusion of seemingly quite disparate styles in Westwood's 1998 collection noting that,

"T-shirts were printed with maps of the British Isles - for the ultimate rebel, there was even one embossed with a graphic penis. 'I call this street fashion,' Westwood said. She did invent the concept, after all. It was, however, a grown-up version of street fashion, with Westwood embracing more traditionally cultural themes. The models emerged not to a punk soundtrack but to the gentle tinkling of classical piano music, while in addition to the punk references in her new collection, there were outfits printed with a pomegranate design inspired by the backdrop of a 17<sup>th</sup> century painting."

(Barron, 1998b: 10)

Here, we can at least in part see how Westwood negotiates an entire pack of different styles to invent an internationally renowned look - a look based on an ambiguity of references and techniques, at once drawing on the traditions of couture and the art of



tailoring but simultaneously invoking outrageous, often disturbing presentations of a seedier and aggressive counterculture. The tattered and frayed hems sported in 1998, for example, may be viewed as a radical departure from the consummate standards ordinarily associated with haute couture - the Milanese catwalk being an incongruous setting for Westwood's latest punk revival. It is through this mixing and matching of fashion statements, and the antagonistic use of purposefully miscast locations for their display, that Westwood has marked herself out as a British designer with a unique identity. Her eccentric, "sometimes batty" (Evans and Thornton, 1989: 145) approach to fashion is often explained in terms of her very 'Britishness' - Westwood has been declared a "national monument" by the fashion press (Bayley, 1998: 14), and the enduring myth that views British style as revolving around eccentricity, individualism and experimentation is all-pervading (de la Haye, 1996). Polhemus (1994), for example, writes about a particularly flamboyant group of punks on King's Road (also the location of Westwood's punk emporium) during the early 1980s, who achieved fame as 'tourist attractions' in the eyes and minds of overseas visitors keen to indulge their own conceptions of British outlandishness and stylish eccentricity - Westwood's own role in the definition of this punk culture having gone a considerable way in helping to locate Britain's capital on the global style map as a centre for experimentation and the deviance of taste (figure 2).

As well as embodying several distinctively national traits herself, Vivienne Westwood also contributes to this British dialogue by commentating on the state of the nation quite



*Figure 2: Punks on King's Road, London c. 1980. The 'outlandish' appearance characteristic of this particular subcultural group posed deliberate challenges to norms of style and taste. Geographically, their King's Road 'hang-out' both mobilised and reflected London's status as streetsyle capital and centre of experimentation.*

explicitly through her creative works. A perennial theme within Westwood's work is that of national identity and British history and Westwood has been described as having a "preoccupation" with notions of "dumpy aristocracy" and the somewhat prissy dress senses of the current British Royals (Evans and Thornton, 1989; 153-4). The most obvious example of this preoccupation with royal history emerged back in 1997 when Westwood made her own claims to the throne and masqueraded as Queen Elizabeth I in full state regalia for a publicity campaign to promote her latest collection. In contrast to her earlier anti-establishment poses, this homage to the royal family was a strategically orchestrated stunt that employed historical costume and reconstruction in particularly unsettling ways in order to go about interrogating the concept of 'Britishness' and its hierarchical class relations. Quite literally, in this instance, Vivienne Westwood, dissenter, heretic and 'bad girl' of fashion with a tough northern accent and gritty past, appointed herself "the shadow monarch" (Davey, 1999:113) and as Davey goes on to

reveal, it is through such poses that she aims to disrupt exactly what it means to be 'British'.

"Westwood has made new English identifications possible by retelling Anglo-Britain's sumptuary past and by revealing how the nation has been constantly recoded, othered, and differentiated by costume".  
(Davey, 1999:113)

Certainly Vivienne Westwood views the British monarchy as fertile ground through which to transplant her ideas on nationalism and also as a useful tool through which to question the *status quo* - even her choice of corporate logo, an orb (figure 3), makes direct reference to her British identity and how she sees this as being intimately bound up with notions of a sovereign state and its attendant class divisions. According to in-house literature, the orb logo symbolises,

"the world, yet it is very British - it is part of the royal regalia which the Queen holds at the State Opening of Parliament. Thus it represents Vivienne Westwood as a British designer with an international perspective. The Orb represents tradition...and describes the work of Vivienne Westwood where all new discoveries in design come from studying tradition."  
(Vivienne Westwood PR Pack, 1998)



Figure 3: Vivienne Westwood's corporate logo. The orb is deeply symbolic and reflects Westwood's own preoccupation with, and problematising of, the British establishment.

The orb logo reflects Westwood's own concerns with the way in which themes of 'tradition' and 'ritual' have come to be crucial identifications within British nationalism. In adopting the orb, she has taken a stalwart symbol of the British establishment and, as has become her trademark, she has cannibalised and subverted its meaning to her own ends - in this case, as a way of vexing the power relations of the nation via the parodying of its meaningful signs and symbols.

Here, then, we see how Vivienne Westwood fully exploits the trappings of British nationalism to great effect, producing exciting clothing collections that are at the cutting edge of, not only design creativity, but also political comment. To pursue this idea, it is possible to look at Vivienne Westwood's work with different types of fabric, since Westwood uses traditional British textiles, each imbued with their own histories and strong senses of regional identity, as catalysts to her own political campaign. In particular, Westwood's valuing of tartan fabric gives a fascinating insight into the mechanisms through which codes of dress might be employed to deconstruct national identity. As Davey (1999: 131) argues,

"Westwood's tartans, constantly inserted into her bustles, jackets, suits and hats, are a permanent reminder in her work of the fabrication of national identities, of their contingency and relation to power".  
(Davey, 1999:131)

Over the years, Westwood has made tartan one of her signature fabrics, to the extent that, for her 'Anglomania' collection of autumn/winter 1993, she invented her own Scottish clan, the MacAndreas, and set about creating its official tartan. Back in the

seventies, tartan had also been co-opted by the punks<sup>3</sup> to become "part of the uniform for the pierced, Mohicaned and disaffected" (Blanchard, 1999a: 186).

This strong subcultural appeal with tartan, and its subsequent popularity among punks and their counterculture is inextricably involved with a truly national discourse. Firstly, the popularity leading to its adoption arises out of its historical positioning as a material emblem of Scottish oppression at the hands of the Anglo-British. Secondly, the tartan kilt galvanises a counter-notion concerned with Scottish dissent and a 'rebel instinct', particularly with regard to the anti-hegemonic uprisings dated to the mid-eighteenth century (McCrone *et al*, 1995; Trevor-Roper, 1983). The tartan fabric, then, has come to be a potent historical symbol of both repression and resistance within the British national story, worn by Scots to mark them out as marginal and subordinate but also worn by Scots as part of a powerful tribal identity, waging against the authority of the throne (Cook, P., 1996; Morton, 1998; Trevor-Roper, 1983).

Accordingly, this fabric, and the contested historical references woven through it, has been usurped by Westwood to meet her own creative struggles over national identity. To cite an example, Vivienne Westwood famously dressed Naomi Campbell (figure 4), Britain's most celebrated black supermodel, in a particularly lurid tartan comprising scarlet, aqua and sherbet yellow in order to make a provocative statement about national belonging and her own weariness with claims of white English supremacy (Davey, 1999). Here, this vivid tartan fabric, a textile so long involved with the marginalising of

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<sup>3</sup> Of course the use of tartan to demarcate subcultural belonging was not solely confined to punk culture. For example, several years before the punk movement, teenage girls adopted tartan turn-ups (among other things) to vaunt their following of Scottish pop idols, The Bay City Rollers. The tartan kilt has also been a perennial feature of many designer collections from Bill Gibb's tartan mini in the 1960s to Jean-Paul Gaultier's legendary attempt during the 1990s to put men in skirts.

a national 'other', went to amplify Westwood's disquiet over racial inequalities and further still, it vexed the entire question of what - and who - is British at the turn of the twenty-first century.



*Figure 4: Naomi Campbell wears tartan, Westwood-style.*

Westwood's tartan, unconventional right down to her choice of psychedelic colouring, reveals a penchant for extracting traditional symbols of nationhood and reinterpreting them in acute and contentious ways. Indeed, it is precisely this sort of mixing and the accompanying disruption of conventional clothing codes that marks out Vivienne Westwood as uniquely positioned within the national fashion scene. Her use of the most provocative of juxtapositions and her startling, often disrespectful 'takes' on the most sacrosanct of British cultural icons illustrates how the world of (British) fashion is

a marginal site, over which a whole range of identity politics can be contested, played out and fought over. Vivienne Westwood has embraced the discursive potential of British fashion and as the foregoing discussion tells, she has used this as a means to interrogate what it is to be a British fashion designer, in Britain, designing British clothes.

## **1.2 Mapping the Thesis: Aims, objectives and structure**

The portrait of Vivienne Westwood that I have sketched here highlights the paradoxical nature of the national fashion industry. It is this complexity that I want to pursue further and which forms a potent backdrop to my thesis at large. British fashion, at the turn of the millennium, is precariously poised between a whole clutch of conflicting narratives, representations and ideologies. Through an examination of these rival encounters and the events that have gone to generate them, we gain a crucial, and as yet neglected, insight into the culture of contemporary fashion, its dilemmas and the industry it supports. In particular, my aim is to look at the relationship between fashion and national identity, positing fashion as a site central to both the re-branding of Britain and also as intimately bound up with contestations over British identity itself including the gendering of Britishness and also its class relations. Of special significance is British fashion's positioning in the global marketplace and how the gathering momentum of the internationalisation of fashion precipitates new perspectives on national identity. With this in mind, I am especially interested in investigating how the apparently straightforward and economically driven process to do with this globalisation of fashion is, in fact, a far more culturally nuanced and locally embedded encounter than has previously been suggested. Furthermore it is an encounter in which the national characteristics of British fashion have become increasingly intricate, questionable - and

questioned - within the internationalising style circuit, and where the ever-widening flows of ideas, cultures and styles render insular and longstanding versions of British fashion inadequate.

These global-local exchanges, which have resulted in the British fashion industry assuming such a state of flux, provide a dynamic setting against which to discuss the more detailed cases that go to illustrate my thesis. Through a detailed examination of two British fashion organisations - Paul Smith Ltd and Mulberry Plc - I aim to unpack the different ways in which these two companies negotiate and sometimes even shape and mobilise the increasingly volatile world of national fashion and the problematic discourses that cross through it. (See also figure 5 - one of several 'methodology boxes' scattered throughout my discussion. This first box gives an introduction to the methodological approaches employed during my investigation and, more specifically, it includes some of my reflections on 'writing the fashion world' and the politics involved in representing that world in a formal written format).

*Figure 5: Methodology Box  
Writing the Fashion World*

**Writing the Fashion World**

Geographers "all face the same problem of facing a blank page; that is, the difficulty of convincingly representing to their audience in written form the things that they claim to have done" (Barnes and Duncan, 1992: 1)

Fluid, fickle, faddish. The fashion world is a domain that seems to defy rational analysis. How, then, should I go about researching this world and, even further, how should I represent my observations, understandings and interpretations of this world to an academic audience?

Broadly speaking, I took an ethnographic approach to researching the British fashion industry. The thrust of my research was centred on two main industrial case studies (the fashion companies, Mulberry and Paul Smith). Within each, I planned to conduct a combination of ethnographic techniques: depth interviews (with various company directors, fashion commentators and respected figures in the industry), participant observation (at a variety of fashion PR events, trade fairs and in several consumption spaces) and documentary analyses (of corporate, media and government-produced texts).

Having little or no experience of working and participating in the fashion business, I was keen to adopt an ethnographic approach since I hoped this would enable a local and detailed exploration of Geertz's (1973: 10) "shaded behaviour" of foreign and complex communities and structures. I will discuss the degree to which I actually succeeded in achieving this at a later stage. What is interesting here is that as I embarked on 'doing' this ethnography (developing



links with Mulberry and Paul Smith, making enquiries, gaining access and setting up fieldwork opportunities) my methodology took on an increasingly amorphous form. The fluid nature of the industry under research meant that my initial structuring of a neat and orderly methodology bore little resemblance to the final fieldwork that I actually conducted. In short, the logistics of my proposed methodology did not 'pan out' as I first envisaged.

Rather than dictating my own methodology, then, I often found myself subject to chance encounters, to lucky coincidences, to compromises and open negotiations on the shape and form that my fieldwork should, and could, take. The nature of my methodology therefore evolved both out, and as a result, of the rather unpredictable environment that I was researching and my status as a researcher in it.

In view of this, it is with some difficulty that I have approached the process of writing about the fickle nature of fashion and my experiences in, and of, it. If an account of ethnographic research is supposed to give a sense of having "been there" (Cook, 1997:146), then the prospect of conclusively 'writing up' my experiences in the field goes against the grain of what I learnt and witnessed within that field. For the fashion industry is frenetic and chaotic, is innovative and flighty, is complex and nuanced. Therefore to concretise my experiences 'on paper' and to 'fix' this visual, ephemeral world via the written (and academic) word is a difficult, and somewhat uneasy, process.

In part, I have tried to represent the slippery worlds of fashion through both the rhetoric and the physical presentation of my thesis (as Barnes and Duncan, [1992: 3] argue, "writing is constitutive, not simply reflective"). To this end, I have chosen to synthesise my discussions on methods, theory and practise (hence the methodology boxes) rather than sectioning them off into discrete and rather incongruous slabs of heavy theory. I have also tried to represent the inherently visual nature of fashion by including a wide range of images as a constitutive part of my text. It is through this holistic approach to writing and representing my encounters in, and thoughts on, the world of fashion that I hope to convey a sense of that world and some of the practical issues, obstacles and ethical dilemmas that shaped my understandings of it.

Both Paul Smith and Mulberry are icons of British fashion, synonymous with the production and marketing of distinct forms of 'Britishness' not only to consumers within the confines of the UK but also overseas, with both labels having a mighty export market. Yet in spite of their iconic national status, both companies, as we shall see, go about generating and deploying their self-confessed British character in exceedingly different ways. Therefore, it is through an exploration of Mulberry and Paul Smith's evolving corporate strategy, symbolic production techniques and product profile that I aim to understand a range of differing national voices and the mechanisms by which each one makes their own claims to the nation (see appendices 1 and 2 for an overview of the nature and activities of Mulberry Plc and Paul Smith Ltd). First, however, I map out the general structure of the thesis and the shape and form that my discussion will take (figure 6). I then continue with the remainder of the chapter (section 1.3) by reviewing the current state and status of the British fashion industry.

**Figure 6: CUTTING, STITCHING & ASSEMBLING -  
THE THESIS STRUCTURE**

*From sidewalk.....to catwalk*



**Chapter One**

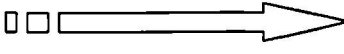
⌘ **Introduction:** The ambiguous state of British fashion - street style capital *and* centre of couture; under resourced, neglected and trivialised *yet* a flagship industry and central force in 'Cool Britannia', the national programme of modernisation.

*Difference is the watchword of the postmodern marketplace.*

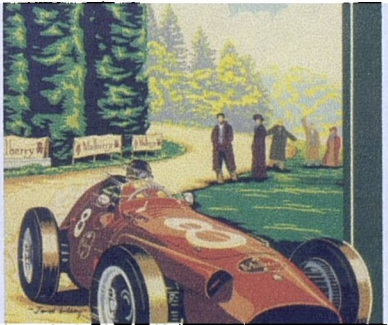


**Chapter Two**

⌘ **Review of literature:** The transforming marketplace - from homogeneity to heterogeneity, from mass production and consumption to flexibly-specialised production and targeted consumption. The move towards more multiple fashion systems and ways of thinking about fashion/identity.



*Fashion does not trickle down from an élite to the majority but bubbles up from all manner of different and diverse cultural spheres.*



*Mulberry sells a nostalgic vision of Britishness, harking back to an older, glorious age. This has been a major contributing factor in the company's downfall: a diversifying & more discerning marketplace questions such exclusive, exclusionary and hidebound definitions of Britishness.*



**Chapter Three**

⌘ **National identity:** Transformations in, and ambiguities of, meanings over the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Britishness and Anglo-British identity.

⌘ Connections between nationness, as a sense of identity, and fashion as a site through which that identity might be articulated.

⌘ Introduction to the cases of Mulberry Plc and Paul Smith, two iconic British fashion labels.

*Paul Smith constructs, and draws upon, contemporary notions of Britishness by fusing traditional and modern cultural references in the mobilisation of diversity.*


**Chapter Four**

- ⌘ **British fashion exports** (to Japan). Economic viability is minimal (due to distances involved) therefore business is brokered in terms of cultural transactions and imaginative geographies.
- ⌘ Imagined Japanese perception of Britishness is steeped in imperial tradition. Sartorially this translates to a demand for: classic branding, exquisite standards and eccentric characteristics. 'Cool Britannia' project targets Japan to update this image.
- ⌘ Both Paul Smith and Mulberry tap into particularities of Japanese market but with varying success. Japanese consumer landscape is site of struggle between old and new Britain.
- ⌘ The globalisation of British fashion is less about homogeneity and more a locally sensitised encounter.

Rule Britannia.....Cool Britannia




*Mulberry remains bound up in the élitist aspirations of 1980s yuppie Britain.*



**Chapter Five**

- ⌘ **Class.** Imaginative geographies have forced a link between British fashion & an aspirational look of the leisure classes - huntin', shootin' and fishin'. Taste as a class privilege following a trickle-down model.
- ⌘ Changes in marketplace has meant alongside these aspirations new 'alternative' taste communities are emerging that fail to fit into conventional class analyses.
- ⌘ New consumer investment in irony, kitsch & juxtaposition displays knowingness & stylistic expertise that criss-crosses class boundaries & disrupts exclusive, & exclusionary, notions of taste.



*Paul Smith has moved with the times, appealing to the 1990s individual rather than to large herds of lifestyle groupings.*



**Chapter Six**

- ⌘ **Gender.** Imperial legacy (as propagated by Mulberry) continues to promote false gender dichotomy - whilst men act, women appear.
- ⌘ Fashion becoming site of refuge and revenge from such fixed gender dictates. Fashion press and fashion companies (such as Paul Smith) embrace ambiguities of identity and promote males and females as contradictory composites - the female ladette, the new man.



**Chapter Seven**

- ⌘ **Afterword:** A vision for the future.

## **Part Two**

### **Discussing the National Fabric**

#### **1.3 Can British Design Cut It?: The state of national fashion**

We are told that Britain is buzzing, that creative industry, amongst which fashion design ranks as one of the nation's most up and coming industrial flagships, is a means to international competitiveness and national prosperity. The British fashion industry is currently enjoying a level of international success not seen since the heady years of 1960s 'swinging London' and fashion designers are once again headline news. As Vanity Fair's European editor recently argued "London is once again a city on the international fashion agenda that sets the pace of what is style. London is now gale-force in its speed" (Talley, 1997: 127). In a similar vein, Chanel's Karl Lagerfeld proclaims that, "London is *hot*...there is a resurgence of ideas, techniques and energy among designers, sculptors, film-makers, the music industry...in fact right across the board in London there is now daring and finesse" (Lagerfeld in Vanity Fair, March 1997: 126) and so we see that Britain is being hailed as "home to the sultans of style" (Meikle, 1996: 11), that British designers are "the seed-bed of innovation" (Crewe and Goodrum, forthcoming) and that they are emblematic of a version of Britishness that is progressive and visionary. In the words of the think-tank Demos,

"Britain has a new spring in its step. National success in creative industries like music, design and architecture has combined with steady economic growth to dispel much of the introversion and pessimism of recent decades. Cool Britannia sets the pace in everything from fashion to food."  
(Leonard, 1997:13)

The concept of 'Cool Britannia'<sup>4</sup> and the fashion industry's influential role within it, supplies a healthy rhetoric based around notions of vibrancy, prosperity and a designer-led revolution set to bolster Britain's image as a world-leader and a creatively exciting country. Yet alongside this 'swinging' image lies a much less buoyant story in which the fashion industry is characterised by a long history of government neglect and industrial marginalisation, a story in which the national fashion industry has had to endure many decades of poor trading performance, escalating costs and mounting pressures of redundancy and recession, and where industry and government alike have failed to back the country's burgeoning talent. Thus, with the much vaunted migration of Britain's most prized design talents, such as Stella McCartney, Alexander McQueen and John Galiano, to more lucrative and stable positions on the Parisian fashion scene, the dilemmas surrounding British fashion are made manifest. As Armstrong (1999: 38) bemoans,

"British Fashion Week - when Dunkirk spirit is tempered by that Nietzschean gloom so typical of the British and some surreal timekeeping. Did we care? Did the fact that Nicole Farhi - one of our strongest commercial names and one of the few who can afford to advertise and thereby lure some of those big American editors to her shows - had decided to up sticks this season for New York cause even the tiniest crease to furrow our brow? Well, sometimes one does despair of London ever being taken seriously internationally, of it ever being seen as more than an occasionally diverting ragbag of quixotic talent that inevitably ends up abroad anyway". (Armstrong, 1999:38)

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<sup>4</sup> It is difficult to pinpoint the first use of the now ubiquitous slogan 'Cool Britannia'. However it is traceable to May 1997 when Blair's Labour government won the General Election, reinvented itself as 'New' Labour and proclaimed its ambition to 'rebrand' Britain. By October 1997 the media had latched on to the idea of a 'new' Britain and constructed a suitable rhetoric to accompany the burgeoning project of modernisation. For example, on 27<sup>th</sup> October, 1997 *Time* magazine boasted a cover story titled 'Renewed Britannia'. Paxman (1998) suggests that Cool Britannia was unveiled in a political setting for the first time in the autumn of 1997 and quotes Blair's speech of 24<sup>th</sup> October to Commonwealth heads of government as one of the first occasions that the slogan was aired in public. "The new Britain is a meritocracy" said Blair "where we break down barriers of class, religion, race and culture". His speech was supported by a video presentation celebrating the creative, commercial and scientific achievements of the new meritocratic Britain, with music from Oasis and the Spice Girls, pictures of dealing rooms and Formula One racing cars.

At once seen as the country's flagship industry, fashion is simultaneously subject to the trammels of long-term economic and cultural subordination and so we find the fashion industry caught in the middle of a contentious political project to do with global competitiveness and parity but also indifference and even mediocrity.

The entire British clothing industry is worth £8 billion annually (Cheshire, 1997: 3). Design and related activity in Britain employs more than 300,000 people and Britain ranks among the world's top five nations for design skills (Design Council, 1997), with nearly one-third of the 300,000 student designers who graduate each year from Europe's design colleges being trained in Britain (COI, 1996). British manufacturers spend £10 billion on product development and design while British design consultancies earn nearly £400 million a year abroad (Cunningham, 1997). The value of cultural exports stood at some £10 billion in 1998 and the cultural economy of fashion is an enormously important component within this creative industries sector (Crewe and Goodrum, forthcoming).

Yet, underlying these remarkably encouraging statistics is a market economy with an under-valued, under-financed and under-developed fashion industry. It seems, argues Paul Smith, owner and designer-in-chief of one of Britain's most successful contemporary menswear empires, that,

"one can no longer mention the British fashion industry without enquiring as to the state of it. And what a state it's in.... The lack of investment from government and industry these past few decades has had an appalling effect on the business, with designers going bust or moving abroad.... We are still considered to be the poor relation of our continental cousins in Paris and Milan.... We used to be a nation of shopkeepers, whereas now we are little more than a themepark without a theme".

(Smith, P., in Jones, D., 1995: 56)

#### **1.4 Chain Store Massacre: Explaining fashion's decline**

The reasons behind this failing of British designer firms are not difficult to identify. They fall into two interdependent categories relating to what I have termed the 'symbolic' and 'industrial' deterioration of national fashion. Following Crewe and Beaverstock, (1998: 296) it is possible to chart the industrial reasons for fashion's decline. Firstly, there has been an under-valuing of the design profession - with those designers remaining in the UK facing an incredibly difficult struggle against the structural and cultural barriers to success within the fashion industry (McRobbie, 1998). For so many, the equation between design and profit is rarely made, and the realms of art & design, and business & commerce remain separated, inhabiting very different imaginary worlds. Secondly, the fashion industry has suffered from a concentrated retail environment dominated by middle market chain stores able, unlike their smaller, independent contemporaries, to afford, for example, the lengthy terms and conditions demanded by prime retail sites. Thirdly, the national clothing production system has been afflicted in large part by what has been termed "mass-productionitis" (Crewe and Beaverstock, 1998: 296) - a symptom of the general decline of textile manufacturing within this country whereby output indexes show a fall by as much as 15 points between 1986 and 1996 (Jones, 1996: 84). This has, in turn, duly led to the abandonment, in the name of economic viability, of the specially commissioned and small scale production 'runs' favoured by design-orientated fashion labels in their pursuit of uniqueness and exacting high standards (Purvis, 1996; Crewe and Forster, 1992). In short, then, what we are seeing here may broadly be viewed as the legacy of Fordism, whose grip on the national fashion industry acts as a powerful barrier to global competitiveness, allowing the more flexible, generously resourced, high calibre Italian, French - as well as the fast-

rising US - fashion industries to set the pace in production and profits on the global scene.

To illustrate further just how paltry the British fashion industry is, when compared to its European rivals, statistics from the Department of Trade and Industry show that our domestic market is comparatively tiny, with annual sales of designer clothes - "the posh stuff" - generating approximately £400 million annually (Armstrong, 1999:38) paling against sales of £1.9 billion in Italy and £1.4 billion in France (Cheshire, 1997). Further still, London is seen as the parochial cousin to other European centres of fashion and has been cast aside as "lacklustre", as well as "plagued by negative publicity due to high profile defections of designers such as Alexander McQueen to rival cities" (Cartner-Morley and Craik, 1999:12). Even Vivienne Westwood, the 'shadow monarch' of the British fashion establishment, has for the past few years had all her collections manufactured in Italy, a country specialising in high quality, small batch production. Westwood laments that "without Italy, I wouldn't exist" (Barron, 1998b: 10).

The history of negativity that is evident here, also translates to the more symbolic causes behind the deterioration of British fashion in recent decades. Recall, for example, the ridicule and derision targeted at Vivienne Westwood with her flamboyant designs and equally outrageous behaviour. This attitude is borne out of a cultural legacy that has gone to feminise and trivialise design creativity, the establishment of fashion, and the practises of clothing consumption. Barnard, for example, cites the prejudice of the Conservative government during the early nineties whereby 'design' was considered a subject in the National Curriculum suitable for study by only "less able children", a distinctly dubious subject, unworthy of attention by more powerful and



intelligent minds (Barnard, 1996:1). McRobbie, perhaps more strikingly still, further emphasises this marginalisation of fashion with her "fashion girls and painting boys" (1998:33), and she discusses the feminisation and attendant trivialisation of the study of fashion in opposition to the more lauded and masculine world of art and its concept of the 'male genius' (see also Pollock, 1988 and figure 7, an account of my own crises over identity as a 'fashion student'). In many ways, therefore, the current debates and dilemmas within British fashion point to an outdated industry, laid low by antiquated attitudes and an aversion to the changing pace and demands of an ever-globalising marketplace.

Figure 7: Methodology Box  
*Identity Crisis - becoming, and being, a fashion student.*

#### **Identity Crisis**

*"Fashion...still finds itself pushed into a position of subordination across the institutional hierarchies" (McRobbie, 1998: 32).*

At this point, I should perhaps mention my own ambivalence towards becoming - and being - a 'fashion student'. Acquired over the course of my research, this label has proved something of a thorny issue in terms of my own struggles over identity and also in my presentation to others both in academic settings and in my encounters with the fashion industry.

As a student (albeit affiliated to a geography department) with a research specialism in fashion, I was conscious of, and concerned with, the 'double marginalisation' that this label of 'fashion student' might engender: not only was I a student (stigmatised by popularist imagery as one of the lowest social castes) but I was a *fashion* student, a field dogged by a long history of academic subordination and derision, one of the the least 'proper' subjects on offer, whose students were commonly caricatured as drop-outs and airheads.

Primarily my initial struggle with the 'fashion student' label was a product of my own preconceptions about the nature of fashion and the type of people who inhabited the fashion world. However my reservations were made manifest in part by the somewhat sceptical attitudes of some academics. Misgivings were voiced, for example, about my chosen topic for research, particularly at a postgraduate level, where it was felt that (the socio-cultural aspects of) fashion could not provide an adequate level of, or contribution to, intellectual and theoretical scholarship. Especially during the first few months of my research, then, I used the term 'fashion student' and the fact that I 'was studying fashion' quite guardedly since (as I discussed in section 1.4) I was very aware of the cultural baggage associated with fashion in its commercial, ideological and scholastic renderings.

This initial unease with my newly found identity, and the predominantly negative connotations and marginal status that I encountered during these early days of my research might also be illustrated with an incident that occurred during my first visit to a fashion trade fair. Having seen an ad in the national trade press for the bi-annual 'Premier Womenswear' trade fair held at the National Exhibition Centre (NEC), Birmingham, I made a telephone inquiry about attending the event. Large groups of students, I was told, were not encouraged (presumably because of their poor image, the threat of plagiarism and the fact that the primary objective of the trade fair was 'to do business' through the placing of retail orders, an activity that precluded students along with all other non-retailers). However, since I was planning on going alone to the trade fair, the

organisers granted me special dispensation and agreed to let me register on the condition I attended Premier during the quieter last day of the fair when the majority of business had been done and deals had been struck. For security reasons, I discovered, there are strict controls on the names and numbers of the people - mainly retail buyers - who go to these trade events. Pre-registering is essential and bouncers are constantly present at the door to oversee the thorough entrance procedure and checks. Along with everyone else, on arrival at the NEC I was issued with a name badge that was to be worn at all times. Unfortunately, unlike other attendee's badges that detailed name and company affiliation, my badge simply read STUDENT in big, block capital letters, a highly visible statement of my 'being different', a label that made me feel out-of-place amidst the buyers and dealers, and undermined, because I was obliged to display a badge stating as such. Therefore, after leaving the registration area, I was quick to relocate my badge away from my lapel to a less conspicuous and half-hidden spot on the handle of my bag. With my badge secreted away, I felt far more authoritative, being able to approach trade stands (850 collections were on show) as 'one of the crowd'. No longer an overtly disempowered student-(time)waster unable to participate in transactions or the wheeler-dealing of trade, I felt more comfortable, more legitimated in engaging the personnel on the stands in conversation, only later revealing my student identity to them when some initial rapport had been established.

This incident illustrates, I feel, my own reservations - part of my '*a priori* assumptions' - as I embarked upon my research project. My discomfort - embarrassment, even - in being what seemed to be the only student in an exhibition centre full of respectable and comparatively high-powered business people provides not only a commentary on the insider/outsider dictates of 'doing ethnography' but most pertinently at this particular juncture in my discussion, it reveals my own personal enactment of what I felt was a wider cultural prejudice towards fashion and those who study it.

Drawn alongside this, however, is an unprecedented excitement and energy regarding British style, hyped as the answer to the country's woes and thus, the deeply contested views of fashion, that we see here, show just how much of a fought over space British fashion has become. Barnard extends what is a curiously double-edged positioning of fashion by identifying the notion of an inherently "dichotomous response" to creativity and he recounts how the "creativity of designers has long been both admired and despised by societies" (1996:1). In a similar vein Elizabeth Wilson makes reference to what she terms as the "cultural ambivalence" that exists towards fashion, explaining this ambivalence away as a result of what she calls the "blatant consumerism" of fashion "shocking" the culture that we live in, while simultaneously expressing the "heart" of that culture, saying something true about it (Wilson, in Barnard 1996:3). Fashion, then, is treated with immense circumspection in the UK and as a result seems to have become trapped in something of a vicious circle - for the creative talents of designers, and the

products they design, are at once under-valued and under-resourced but simultaneously these same talents continue to provide the inspiration on which other countries feed. Stuart (1998:2), writing in reference to London Fashion Week, September 1998 points out that,

"British Fashion Week...finds a sartorial industry divided. Limping along the catwalk are the textile and manufacturing side of the business, hit by economic problems in the Far East, the first bites of recession and the strength of the pound cutting exports. But strutting behind in its flashiest spike heels is the other side of the industry - our hotshot indigenous designers, our buyers and even our retailers. In recent years most of the major textile manufacturers have closed down their factories in the UK - Courtauld Textiles, Dewhirst, Coats Viyella, William Baird and Claremont among them...Burberry and Aquascutum have both introduced workforce casualisation and imposed redundancies". (Stuart, 1998:2)

What is surprising here is that "in a global fashion market dominated by the resources of France and Italy and the wealth of the US, it is to Britain that the world still looks for new ideas" (Brampton, 1997:56), a revelation which is still stronger evidence of the unresolved tensions between creativity and commerce within this country and further still goes to underscore my assertion of British fashion as a fickle domain ruled by confusion and chaos. As the think-tank Demos argues,

"Britain is a particularly creative nation. We have a history of eccentricity and quirkiness, and an ethos that values individuality, non-conformity, new ideas and difference...cultivating that creativity requires us to [see]...creative fields not as marginal but as central to our economic future". (Leonard, 1997:52)

In addition to this damaging cultural legacy that has characterised fashion as a female - and therefore marginal - domain, British fashion also continues to suffer from the effects of a much broader crisis of representation involving the actual definition of a

British 'look'. As I have gone to show, the world of British fashion is a baffling network of contradictory signs and symbols - a deeply vulnerable world up against the pressures of economic mutilation, as well as cultural corrosion, by a team of much stronger foreign players. Whilst "British style is now perceived to be one of the cultural signposts of the nineties" (Brampton, 1998b: 129), perhaps the biggest task facing the flagging industry comes in actually defining of what that British style consists. From Orwell's (1941) inter-war characterisation of Britain as the land of 'the Lion and the Unicorn' symbolic of the mixed metaphors of stateliness and creativity, there has been tremendous confusion over representations of the nation and the coining of its style, so much so, that Vogue, in its 'Best of British Special Issue' (June 1998: 129) declared that "there is no such thing as British style", instead claiming that design in the UK is ruled by utter anarchy and "raw vigour" to the extent that, in the words of the publisher, John Brown,

"It's a terrible, horseshit idea that there even is a British style. You can point to elements of it, of which confidence is the main one, but you can't define it. That would be nonsense."  
(Brown in Vogue, June 1998: 129)

Nonsense or not, as I will go on to show, the task of defining 'Britishness' has come to be a national preoccupation, with fashion assuming a central function as one of the key material and symbolic resources required in its production and sustenance. This preoccupation is also echoed in the alleged economic advantages of selling British style, with de la Haye championing 'Britishness' as a value-adding factor in the merchandising of clothes. "Whether inadvertantly absorbed", she writes, "or fully exploited by fashion designers, national identity offers a route to product differentiation and makes good business sense" (1996:11-12). Yet, good sense or not, as Brown vehemently points out

(above), there is a danger, in assuming the irreducibility of cultural and national identities, of pursuing a "naturalist definition" (Hall, 1996: 2) of identification, set to essentialise even the most slippery of constructions. It is to these definitions and the concerns they have raised that I now turn.

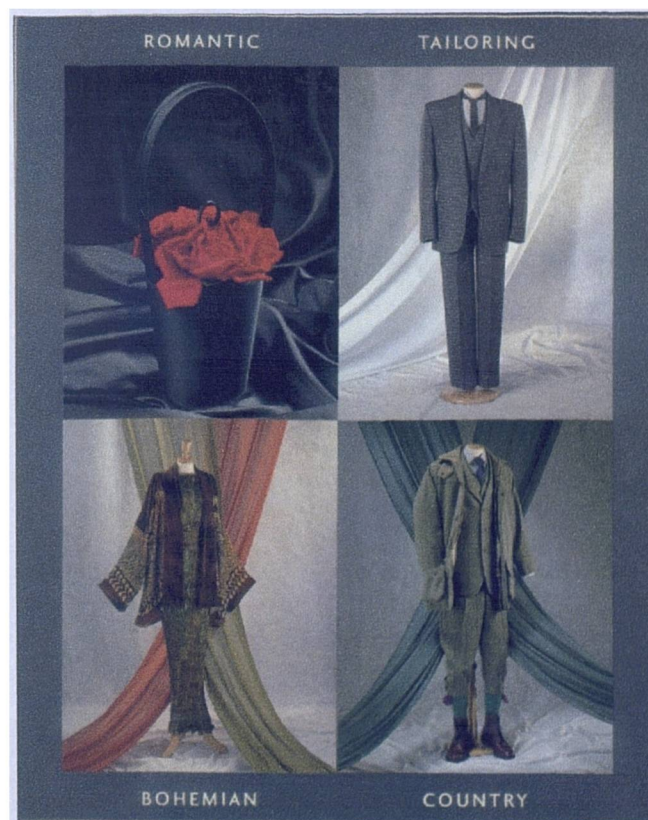
### **1.5 'Something A Bit More Zen': The time for change**

As I have already outlined, in many ways British style is suffering from a crisis of representation and from an unstable status characterised by ambiguity and contradiction. For example, whilst British national identity has traditionally been built around a powerful Protestant ethic which militates against show and excess (de la Haye, 1996; Samuel, 1992), fashion with all of its spectacle and glamour is, quite paradoxically, being heralded as the lifeline for a flagging national image. A similar tension is found when the aspirational images associated with British couture and with classic, iconic British labels are juxtaposed against the globally celebrated visions of British streetstyle and its coining of 'Cool Britannia'. These competing portraits of 'Britain' and 'Britishness' call into question definitive claims to the nation previously made by the imperious marketing strategies of powerful British fashion houses and other such cultural markers. According to McDermott (1987), British design has quintessentially been identified with Burberry macs, William Morris textiles and Chippendale furniture - an image that totally ignores alternative British traditions to do with non-conformism, eccentricity and anti-establishment feeling with the fashion industry assuming a key role in the reproduction and maintenance of these 'essential' identities. As we shall see, although there is no single British identity *per se* in clothing, certain 'looks' have been nominated as embodying a sense of 'Britishness' and of authenticity more so than others. As Franklin (1996: 17), for example, points out,

"notions of British style are copied all over the world. Countries like Japan and North America buy into a perceived idea of what they think British style really is, and companies like Mulberry, Aquascutum and Burberry export a uniform of the country squire hinting at outdoor pursuits like hunting, shooting and fishing".

(Franklin, 1996:17).

Here Franklin touches on the remarkably privileged and extremely powerful position held by a key set of British fashion companies and their attendant 'cultural intermediaries' (advertisers, designers, press agents) in the selling of a definitive British 'look'. A handful of fashion companies (Burberry, Mulberry and Aquascutum among them) have led the field in marketing themselves as 'iconic' British organisations, becoming the byword of an 'authentic' British style and between them, they have built



*Figure 8: 'The Cutting Edge' exhibition at the V&A, 1997. Although received as a landmark exhibition, the groupings of 'Romantic', 'Tailoring', 'Bohemian' and 'Country' raised concerns from some industry insiders and fashion commentators (author's interviews) for offering only a partial view of British fashion.*

up a portrait of the nation in which they have been free to dictate and define who and what belongs there (Goodrum, forthcoming). Thus, for so long, national style has been couched in an exclusive image revolving around this nostalgic notion of the sporting country squire, of Britain as "ye olde gifte shoppe" and as bound up with "an aura of snobbishness" and the sale of the class system (Mitchell, 1996:23).

A similar situation, whereby the power of fashion's cultural intermediaries arises once more may be seen in the case of the exhibition held at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, under the heading 'The Cutting Edge: Fifty Years of British Fashion 1947-1997'<sup>5</sup>. This exhibition made moves to encapsulate the development of a distinctive British fashion identity in the post-war period and set about achieving its goal through the active distillation of British style into four discrete topic areas - these being 'Romantic', 'Tailoring', 'Bohemian' and 'Country' (figure 8). The resulting portrait of British fashion being a rather limited and partialised rendition, deprived of all its complexities and confusions in a bid to rationalise - to essentialise - the character of the industry and the nation it represents into a set of tidy, but not terribly rigorous, groupings. In particular, the exhibition narrated the history of post-war fashion through a decidedly exclusive lens. By indulging the lofty world of haute couture it failed to acknowledge the equally key influence of streetstyle in British fashion and, most important of all, it omitted to flag up the crucial interrelationship between the two. Ultimately then, 'The Cutting Edge', with its reductivist approach to Britishness, gives an example of the problems involved with seeking essentialist explanations of all cultural phenomena because, in the words of Wilson (1985: 10-11),

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<sup>5</sup> Interestingly the chief sponsor of The Cutting Edge exhibition was the iconic British fashion company, Mulberry. An aspirational brand famed for its 'huntin', shootin', fishin' look and élitist discourses (see chapter three), Mulberry's own corporate 'take' on British identity was presumably a significant influence in setting the parameters and content of this exhibition.

"they constantly escape from the boxes into which rational analysis tries to pack them: they have a Protean quality. This suggests we need a variety of 'takes' on fashion...(to) attempt to view fashion through several different pairs of spectacles simultaneously".

(Wilson, 1985:10-11)

These dominant projections of Britishness, and the somewhat myopic, backward-looking and hidebound representations that they feature - 'The Cutting Edge's' stylisation of Britain as a rustic and romantic nation - has meant both domestic and overseas consumers have wearied of the hackneyed and clichéd images pedalled by creative industry and cultural iconography. Indeed, "Britishness embarrasses British business" (Leonard, 1997:9) - a sentiment endorsed by British Telecom, British Gas, British Home Stores and the British Airport Authority, with their recent jettison of all things 'British' from their corporate names and identities (Leonard, 1997:9) being a symbolic act of national renunciation in a commercial arena which no longer values the outmoded associations of traditional Britishness. British Airways has also toned down its national affiliation, announcing that "its cabin crews are to become 'less British' and 'more informal' during flights" in a bid to lose their "starchy headmistress in navy gloves" image (Thompson, 1998: 9).

The bad press attracted by British design industries due to their unorganised and unstrategic, sometimes even supercilious approach to modernisation and image management signals a potentially ruinous period for British fashion and the creative sector. Therefore, in a bid to address this situation and against the backdrop of deep rooted neglect and mismanagement, a 'climate of change' has appeared, in large part, spearheaded by the British government as a means to rejuvenating creative industry at a national level and to raising the profile of the country for global audiences. In the words of Tony Blair in the aftermath of Scottish devolution, "this is a time for change,



renewal and modernity", an opportunity to re-brand Britain with "something a bit more zen" (Pearman, 1997:7). Essentially then, techno-talking New Labour Britain has ushered in a modernisation project, under the much-vaunted banner of 'Cool Britannia', to inculcate ideas of regeneration and national re-birth. What is particularly interesting here, is the heavy rhetoric used to galvanise this sentiment of change, for an entire 'discourse of renewal' has been forged at an institutional level as an aid to modernisation. This discourse refers to the language invented by New Labour and its supporting institutions as a way of describing future directives for British nationalism, banishing in large part all thoughts of heritage hugging Britain and replacing it with upbeat, zappy and futuristic ideas and initiatives. There is much talk of national 're-branding', 'renewal' and 'renaissance', of 'innovation', 'forward-thinking' and 'diversity', and in the midst of this discourse the fashion industry and creative sector is centrally positioned as a means to realising this renewal of identity. So long overshadowed by a legacy of heavy industry, government neglect and cultural marginalisation, the British fashion industry with its strength and talents in design creativity and innovation has offered up a route to an extremely visual re-presentation of Britishness drawing on alternative national images of a "real Britain...which has more to do with Ricky and Bianca's [the young mechanic and market stall owners in the popular television soap opera, Eastenders] ups and downs" (Pool *et al*, 1999:2) than with the élitist, inaccessible and seemingly often irrelevant iconography of an older national order.

However, the concept of 'Cool Britannia' and of a 'New Britain' poised to challenge its global competitors, has not, I should point out, been borne solely out of inventive government policy and conscious political strategy. Rather, this urgent renewal of identity reflects something of a knee-jerk reaction to a much broader series of cultural

and economic incidents that, together, form a touch-light for change. The advent of the new millennium coinciding with devolution, increasing European integration and global recession has necessitated feelings of introspection and a questioning of identity. Therefore, whilst this preoccupation over definitions of the nation for the 21<sup>st</sup> century has been hailed as marking a 'revolutionary' juncture by government and policy-makers alike, I believe that beneath the hysteria and hype, what we are actually experiencing with this cooling of Britannia is very little more than a classic case of identity politics at work. In generic debates on cultural identity the idea that "identity only becomes an issue when it is in crisis" (Mercer, 1990:43) is a foremost theme. Recall, for example, my discussion (section 1.1) of tartan fabric and its use and deployment in the formulation of a coherent Scottish identity through which to foster a sense of shared struggle in the battle over territory ownership. This sentiment may be almost directly transposed onto current debates over British identity in the face of growing global competition and the vulnerable position against which Britain has to trade both economically and culturally.

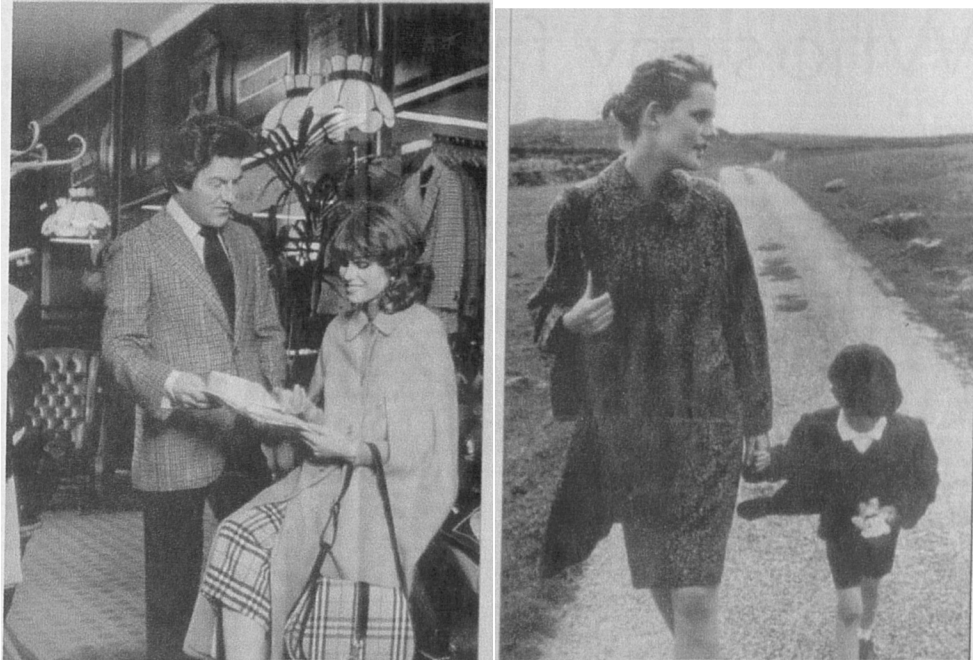
Challenges to any community customarily produce a reactionary crystallisation of identity and a pressing need to define 'who and what we are and comprise' (Cohen, 1997; McCrone, 1998) and therefore the latest attempts at renewing Britain's identity may be explained as a symptom of such a community under threat. Indeed, such is the degree of vulnerability experienced in British industry, that in 1997, the then newly elected Labour government's Department of Culture, Media and Sport implemented a Creative Industries Task Force with the specific remit to "take steps to maximise the economic impact of the creative industries in the UK" (Smith, 1997:1). This task force, under the leadership of Chris Smith MP, headed up a salvage operation to bring creative

industry up to speed and to sell Britain as a creative hot house. Yet for all the touting of this new "Creative Britain" (Smith, 1998) the vision behind this image still has a somewhat dubious provenance and takes very few active or innovative steps to truly penetrate the longstanding problems that beset fashion and Britishness alike. Creativity, in the New Labour pantheon, just as its predecessors, only seems to be understood when it is welded to industry and when economic maximisation is the key motivation in having to come to terms with the otherwise strangely off-beat and alien worlds of design and fashion. What has been heralded as a sea-change in the status of British fashion, actually amounts to what is little more than the spin-doctoring of a much older prejudice against fashion - a short lived revolution for a still-crisis-hit national industry. Thus we see that Tony Blair, instigator and figurehead of New Labour, has found the task of defining and redesigning Britain extremely problematic. Blair is feeling,

"increasingly irritated as his attempts to speak up for Britain's creative industries including fashion, music and technology, have been ridiculed by critics...most recently, the comic Ben Elton condemned Cool Britannia as 'a triumph of style over substance'. The episode has exposed the dangers of seeking to define Britishness. Mr. Blair has shown himself highly skilled at catching the mood of the country, but attempts to package and market Britain seem doomed." (Ward, 1998:5)

The cautionary nature of this particular tale, however, belies the success of rebranding that has taken place on a much smaller scale within the fashion industry itself and new, refreshing 'takes' on quintessential British brands have met with favourable results. Stalwarts of traditional British style such as Aquascutum, Margaret Howell, Clarks and Burberry have all become innovators of fresh approaches to an otherwise dated national look stereotypically personified by the country squire and associated with a 'golden age' of empire. Burberry, for example, outfitter to the British 'county set', has recently turned its troubled brand around to be labelled as "born-again" after "cleaning up its

collections" and making the move from being priggishly "mumsy" to displaying "sharp-as-a-knife" tailoring modelled by Stella Tennant and Kate Moss and sported by Britpop's Gallagher brothers and Jarvis Cocker (figure 9). In 1998, Burberry's profits had dropped by 60 per cent, in main part due to the Asian crisis where the majority of



*Figure 9: Born-again Burberry. In the 1970s, Burberry made Joanna Lumley (left, with Patrick Lichfield) look mumsy. In contrast, the autumn/winter 1998 campaign (right) was, photographed by 'super' Mario Testino, snapper-to-the-stars; featured aristocratic face-de-nos-jours, Stella Tennant, and signalled that Burberry had begun to turn around its flagging image.*

its market was located but, with the introduction of a new, younger, more "fashion forward" line under the names of 'Prorsum' and 'Thomas Burberry', Burberry has seen an increase in sales and is cautiously optimistic about its future. The modernisation of the brand has been extremely subtle, with the signature and internationally renowned 'Burberry check' remaining ever present but open to reinterpretation, going from 'fusty to funky' with an injection of playful colouring and more up-to-date silhouettes (Butler, 1999: 9; Sherwood, 1998: 3). In a similar vein, even Clarks, the immeasurably dowdy shoe company, has repositioned itself in the marketplace, attracting astonishment from

style editors with headlines such as "Clarks are cool. No really" (The Guardian, 2<sup>nd</sup> September, 1998).

In many ways, the British fashion industry has witnessed glimpses of a renaissance if only on a small scale, with its iconic labels slowly pulling themselves out of an enduring identity crisis. What is particularly interesting here, is that this reversal of fortune has come about despite the ongoing problems and awkwardness of government policy over modernisation and the maladjusted campaign surrounding New Labour's 'Cool Britannia'. The changing face of British fashion has witnessed success at its grass roots, where the dilemmas of 'doing business' under a British banner are experienced first hand by British companies. In turn, what this points to is the still gaping chasm that exists between government strategy and the needs and requirements of its national industry.

This exploration into the state and status of British fashion that I have mapped out in this introductory chapter demonstrates the changing fortunes and complexities that prevail within the industry. As the title of the chapter suggests, it is indeed 'all change aboard the fashion express'. We join the world of British fashion at a fascinating juncture and at a truly marginal moment in both its cultural and economic development. For British fashion is at once financially impoverished, under-invested and, with slumps in its production and manufacturing output, regarded nationally as a sunset industry. Yet simultaneously British fashion is also regarded as a creative flagship and revered around the globe as the capital of innovation and street styling. The national fashion scene is characterised, as we have seen here, by a whole series of contradictions and I will explore these in more detail as my discussion unfolds. In the chapter that follows I

turn my attention to more philosophical and theoretical treatments of fashion so that these contradictions might be contextualised from a developing intellectual perspective.

## CHAPTER TWO

### **Beyond the Big Hair: Reviewing consumption, globalisation and fashion**

#### **2.1 The 'F' Word: Academic denial**

Just as there are fashions in clothing and style, so too are there fashions in academic thought and geographical discussion. I begin the chapter by delving into geography's historiography, using the scientific and heavily gendered 'geographical tradition' as a means to explaining the persistent denial of fashion scholarship, not only by 'geography' in an abstract form but also by 'geographers' themselves, actively involved in channelling the discipline and its course of study. In turn, this discussion builds on my previous assertion (in chapter one) of fashion as a site of struggle, plagued by industrial as well as intellectual subordination. More crucially still, however, the chapter goes on to map out, and to discuss how, with changing epistemological trends - what Jackson (1995) has coined as the 'changing geographies of consumption' - the scene is at last being set for fashion to finally "emerge from the dark corners of academic awareness" (Niessen and Brydon, 1998:ix). In order to explore this emerging scene, the chapter reviews and critiques debates on consumption, globalisation and fashion (and the interrelations between these three fields). For the case of British fashion that I outlined in my introductory chapter, its dilemmas, difficulties and diversity, is part of a much wider network of theories and practises, a network that is historically embedded and globally extensive. This chapter therefore orientates British fashion - and all its complexities - into a broader theoretical framework and sets the backdrop against which my more specific discussion of Britishness and the fashion industry will then be played out.

The much vaunted 'cultural turn' (Chaney, 1994) of the late 1980s and early 1990s signalled a trend away from various strands of Marxist political economy towards the study of symbolism and to an engagement with the representation of different spaces, positing culture as being central to human life and to the power struggles involved in social relationships (Cosgrove and Jackson, 1987). Here, the 'cultural', following a history of academic marginalisation and neglect, received "star" treatment from within the social sciences at large (Pratt, 1997:1911), a *leitmotif* for a new era in which "all the world's a stage, screen or magazine" (McRobbie, 1996:335). For human geography, this academic 'hijacking' of culture offered impetus to an emerging 'new' cultural geography that moved away from Sauerian definitions towards more interpretive understandings, with an insistently critical political edge (Gregory and Ley, 1988); a valuing of the immaterial, and of the ways in which "people transform the mundane phenomena of the material world into a world of significant symbols to which they give meaning and attach value" (Cosgrove and Jackson, 1987: 99). Within these emergent questions of cultural production and consumption, creative industry offered a rich seam from which to mine a range of debates over processes of self-signification and the cultural construction of meaningful identities, with recent research, for example, touching on the realms of music (Leyshon *et al*, 1998), food (Bell and Valentine, 1997; Cook and Crang, 1996) and film (Clarke, 1997) as powerful markers of place and identity. Fashion, of course, has also begun to feature in this research agenda with dress constituting one of the most basic methods through which we are able to place ourselves and others in the social world. Crewe and Beaverstock (1998) for example give an account of the importance of the fashion industry in defining and enhancing the identity of Nottingham's Lace Market and the people who choose to consume there (see chapter



five). The dress historian, Maynard (1999) tells more explicitly still of the influence of Aboriginal dress in the search for a collective sense of Australian identity.

However, this "riot" of culture (Matless, 1995:395) that has appeared in geographical debates during the last decade denies a more problematic genealogy in which the cultural industry of fashion in particular has been practically invisible and where "the great voids in fashion scholarship can be partially explained by the fact that the study of dress often carries with it negative associations" (Palmer, 1997:297). As Lipovetsky (1994:3-4) laments,

"the question of fashion is not a fashionable one among intellectuals.... It turns up everywhere on the street, in industry, and in the media, but it has virtually no place in the theoretical inquiries of our thinkers. Seen as an ontologically and socially inferior domain, it is unproblematic and undeserving of investigation; seen as a superficial issue, it discourages conceptual approaches.... The study of fashion needs new impetus, renewed questioning".  
(Lipovetsky, 1994:3-4)

The quantitative revolution of the 1960s engendered a shifting relationship in human geography, away from a regional tradition with its emphasis on description, towards a discipline more concerned with the discovery of universal spatial laws and the scientific modelling and predicting of human spatial behaviour (Cloke *et al*, 1991; Livingstone, 1992). Whilst geography as a spatial science did not ignore the clothing industry entirely, the majority of studies focused on locational analyses of the industry and on economically fuelled surveys to do with retail patterning and its spatial movement. What these studies failed to address was the idea of the fashion industry as a 'cultural economy' (Braham, 1997), concerned not only with the material implications of manufacturing, distributing and selling but simultaneously also able to commentate on the 'aesthetics of existence' (Foucault, 1977) and their cultural stylisation of everyday

life. Here, the fashion industry is seen not only in terms of its economic imperatives but it is also viewed as being a crucial agent in the production of culture and cultural identities - as a domain where the deliberate inscription of fashionable images with meanings and associations is a characterising feature and where fashion is purpose-built to secure certain effects at every stage of its commodity chain.

In the past, the study of the fashion industry has been extremely one-dimensional and a universal approach, with its tendency towards generalisation, has been applied at the expense of more nuanced perspectives that deal with the production and propagation of iconography and cultural representation. This 'scientific' stance has tended to overlook, even to frown upon, the assumed superficialities of fashion's creative consciousness and Palmer (1997:299) comments on the "serious problem" of analytical techniques that,

"concentrate on quantitative analysis without incorporating a broader cultural framework...the 'scientific method' obliterates any of the nuances and personal or cultural perspectives of production, consumption and taste that make fashion such a complex and engrossing study".  
(Palmer, 1997:299)

This obliteration of cultural perspectives from research is part of a much broader academic conceit (as I discussed in section 1.4) in which the pursuit of all-consuming truths has rendered any base attention to the arts of the body (including fashion and clothing) as being "scholarly unmentionables" (Brydon and Niessen, 1998:ix). It is part of an academic denial in which, as Steele (1991) suggests in her article 'The F-Word', fashion is a marginalised topic driven to the sidelines of academic attention because of the Enlightenment's rationalising project and its legacy which goes against notions of an expressive, often uncontrolled and inherently sexualised body as being a suitably heavyweight subject for intellectual study. This idea of the clothed body as a

disquieting, even disturbing presence when placed in an academic setting, can be explained partly in terms of the array of ambiguities that surround fashion, many of which I have already sketched out in my opening chapter - recall for example the shock tactics employed by couture designers through their iconoclastic creations set to rock the establishment (McDowell, C., 1994), or the utter confusion over what actually constitutes national style. The boundaries of fashion are resolutely unclear and it is this inherent ambiguity that makes clothing an uneasy territory for a geographic discipline with a long history of scientific and rational endeavour. Wilson writes about what she terms as the "strangeness of dress" (1985:1), referring to the way in which clothing is peculiarly positioned as a liminal zone, forever negotiating the boundaries between the biological body and the social being, between the public and the private. She argues that,

"clothing marks an unclear boundary ambiguously, and unclear boundaries disturb us...if the body with its open orifices is itself dangerously ambiguous, then dress, which is an extension of the body yet not quite part of it, not only links that body to the social world, but also more clearly separates the two. Dress is the frontier between the self and notself".  
(Wilson, 1985:2-3)

And so we see that the frontiers which criss-cross the clothed body as well as the many discourses around it - Sawchuk (1988:62), for example, states that fashion "is a phenomenon which threatens the very stability of segregated zones: man/woman, subject/object, the personal/political, reality/illusion" - have led to a certain nervousness about a geography of fashion dealing with the socio-cultural politics of clothing and the industry which produces it. (See also figure 10 for a discussion of my own experiences with the difficulties and dilemma's in fusing geography and fashion).

Figure 10: Methodology Box  
An Anti-Research Ethic: Geography research, fashion work

**An Anti-Research Ethic**

*The commercial professions have themselves been notoriously uninterested in their own history...dominated [by] their...obsessive presentism...driven only by issues of the moment (Mort, 1996: 128).*

Mort highlights the hand-to-mouth existence of the commercial professions (including those of the fashion industry) who are accustomed to living minute-by-minute within a frenetic work environment. Throughout my research, I was confronted with the temporary, momentary nature of the fashion industry and, in setting up my fieldwork and in conducting several periods of participant observation at various fashion companies and events, I was forced to deal with this alien environment and mind-set first hand.

Coming from the rather sedate background of 'academic researcher' where time is set aside for contemplation, posturing and carefully-formulated thought, I was continually amazed by the speed, chaos and instability of the fashion industry. For example, part of my participant-observation was undertaken at Life PR, the PR company responsible for promoting London Fashion Week. It was here, whilst working (essentially as an office junior) in the Life offices on Harrow Road in West London, that the startling differences between my life as a PhD student in geography and my new found position as a fashion gofer were brought home.

The world of studying geography and the world of working in fashion are undoubtedly far removed. Indeed one of my first - and ongoing - dilemmas during my fieldwork was how to introduce and to explain my involvement with fashion. Introducing myself as a 'geography PhD student' seemed to cause confusion ('Geography? That's irrigation and stuff, isn't it?'), whilst a PhD had little value in the PR workplace where promotion and status is measured largely in terms of practical experience and length of service rather than in formal qualifications. I therefore found myself constantly changing my 'cover story' to suit my environs - not to be outrightly deceptive, but merely to justify my presence in a fashion setting in relevant terms. I began to dread being asked what I was studying 'back at college' because it was difficult to succinctly explain the connections between geography and fashion when traditionally they seemed to inhabit very different imaginary worlds. Most of the time whilst at Life PR, therefore, I passed myself off as simply 'a student' - a rather vague description, but one that was easy to maintain as there was always a handful of casual workers and students milling around the Life office on various work placements and most Life employees were too busy 'doing their jobs' to worry much about who I was, where I had come from and what I was doing.

When I did expand on my status as a participant-observer and researcher I found myself couching my PhD project in a very specific way. In the industrial settings where I carried out my fieldwork I soon found that the business people and office workers who were my co-workers, my interviewees and my gatekeepers were much more receptive and understanding of my research aims and objectives if I pitched them in quite 'scientific' language and empirical terms. It seemed that my talk of exports, of economic exchange, marketing strategy and profit maximisation were viewed as far more comprehensible subjects worthy of long-term study than when I attempted to explain the cultural implications of my research ('the fluffy stuff') which was often met with a puzzled 'but what's that got to do with geography?'. Presumably some of this puzzlement stemmed from the fact that I was indeed dealing with business people and workers who were able to engage with, and to tune into, the economic side - the actual process of 'doing business' in the fashion industry - far better than the less familiar and less quantifiable aspects of my project to do with interpretation, symbolisms and iconography.

During my time at Life PR I often found the roles I was juggling - as a participant (an office junior) and as an observer (a PhD student) - to be very disparate. For example, the physical environs of, and atmosphere at, Life PR was far removed from the rather quiet, dingy, draughty office that I had left behind in Cheltenham. Housed in an old car showroom, the Life office is a large, open plan building furnished with approximately fifty workstations. The layout follows the lores of Feng-shui: wind chimes, curved plinths, spot-lighting and a petrol-blue and orange colour scheme are used to channel various 'energies'. There is a constantly frenzied atmosphere in the office: if one person is not under stress or trying to meet a deadline, the person next to them is. This chaotic atmosphere is also enabled by several TV monitors that

hang from the rafters and that pipe MTV into the office-space. It is a vibrant, youthful atmosphere where snap decisions are made and where 'time is money'.

This immediacy - Mort's "obsessive presentism" - of fashion PR is evident in the key role of the telephone at Life. Almost all business is done on the 'phone since this medium allows direct exchanges and interaction (unlike written letters or even e-mail and faxing). The telephone is the focus of office life and, on my arrival at Life PR, I was told never to leave a telephone ringing - it must be answered at all costs. The importance of the telephone is taken to extreme lengths with Life employees diving across the office to answer calls, the rationale for this behaviour being that the caller may just be 'Ali' McQueen, Philip Treacy or some such other 'big - and influential - fashion cheese' who cannot be left waiting.

Everything at Life seemed to be last minute. I worked in the Life offices in the run up to London Fashion Week (February, 1998) and was astonished at the seemingly flimsy approach taken to organising this event. For example, the day before the official launch of London Fashion Week almost half the requests for press releases and Fashion Week timetables were abandoned because not enough time had been allotted to collating, stapling and stuffing envelopes in time to catch the last post of the day. The official launch was also to feature Honor Fraser (a supermodel) posing in a body-painted Union Jack. Only hours before the arrival of the world's press to photograph Honor, the organising team at Life realised that the Max Factor sponsoring logo had been omitted from the body-painting design. To save face and to appease the sponsors of the launch, the Life team began scribbling out amendments to the design on tiny, crumpled 'post-it' notes - a seemingly rather casual, even slipshod, way of dealing with what was to be the defining publicity image of the event.

These experiences and observations whilst working at Life PR showed, amongst other things, that the industry is pacey, momentary and chaotic. Certainly there is something of an 'anti-research' ethic since fashion PR is about living 'for the moment' rather than investing in minutely detailed planning and months of investigation. It is a spontaneous world where plans can change in the instant of a telephone call. Such uncontrollability, such slipperiness and such volatility goes, I think, to inform the academy's longstanding unease with, and circumvention of, the fashion world.

Most important of all, however, this geographical denial of fashion does not end here.

It cannot simply and solely, I think, be explained away in terms of some abstract, preordained, even uncontrollable, historiography. Rather, it is crucial to examine the geographers themselves and their very active roles in the shaping and production of this history, since geography from its formalisation during the nineteenth century by heroic and 'objective' male explorers, as with so much Western thought, shares a heritage of masculinism and masculinist rationality (Bondi and Domosh, 1992; Massey, 1991a; Rose, 1993). This rationality, characterised by an exhaustiveness of masculinist claims to knowledge, supposedly untainted by any particular social position, emotional feeling or personal value system, has meant that geographers, detached and male, have dictated the shape, form and content of their intellectual study. In turn, the marginalisation of women as producers of geographical knowledge - in 1991 for example only 25.1 per

cent of members of the Institute of British Geographers were women (Lee in Rose, 1993:1) - has had important implications for the framing of geographical research. As Rose (1993: 2) comments,

"Feminist geographers have long argued that the domination of the discipline by men has serious consequences both for what counts as legitimate geographical knowledge and who can produce such knowledge. They have insisted that geography holds a series of unstated assumptions about what men and women do, and that the discipline concentrates on the spaces, places and landscapes that it sees as men's". (Rose, 1993:2)

This rationalising approach to the production of knowledge revolving around an androcentric construction of the geographical world goes some way in explaining the absence of fashion scholarship in human geography. Normatively, geography has been dictated as a male domain, whilst fashion on the other hand has stereotypically been defined through the feminisation of style. It is this problematic characterisation of what have been theorised as two quite divergent fields that I aim to address in my following discussions, for the nature of this 'new' cultural geography, with its study of consumption practises and symbolic currency, opens up fresh avenues into both the commercial and cultural world of fashion fostering a *rapprochement* of these two fields and assigning fashion to a geographical agenda, in which, as Cosgrove and Jackson (1987:95) suggest,

"culture is not a residual category, the surface variation left unaccounted for by more powerful economic analyses; it is the very medium through which social change is experienced, contested and constituted." (Cosgrove and Jackson, 1987:95)

## **2.2 Getting A Life: From homogeneity to heterogeneity**

Bauman tells us that since the 1980s, consumption has come to occupy the "cognitive focus of life" (1992:49) in which the cultivation of the self and the constitution of identity is paramount. The consumer landscape, physical, metaphorical and symbolic is a key location in the construction of these meaningful identities - a space in which it is no longer acceptable for us to have merely the shirt, we also have to have the shagpile carpet and the entire lifestyle range to boot (Buttolph, 1998:66). Indeed the 'lifestyling' of consumer goods has come to be the definitive mode of consumption in the contemporary marketplace. Consumers may literally go 'lifestyle shopping' in the pursuit of very particular cultural identities with specific dictates on how the social body should be coded and performed as well as the type of environment in which this should all take place (Crang, 1996; Shields, 1992b). Within this commodification of different lifestyles, we see fashion assuming a crucial role, since it is perhaps the most fundamental form of acculturation through which identities are created, constructed and presented - the habitus of clothing (Bourdieu, 1986; Craik, 1994; Mauss, 1973) being shaped by and in turn, shaping, our socio-cultural conduct. Here, fashion is seen as upholding an anti-foundationalist sentiment (Turner, 1992) in which the clothed body is a discursive production, part of a complex system of symbols generated by a consumer culture where lived experience is eclipsed by fashion's obsession with "aesthetic holograms" (Kroker and Kroker, 1988:45) and strategies of representation. The cultural attributes, as well as the capital gains, of the lifestyling of fashion tell of an increasingly demanding marketplace that has undergone a series of key transformations in recent years both in terms of the practical nature of 'doing business' in the rag trade but also in terms of its more conceptual theorisation and the way in which these transformations have been dealt with via the "changing geographies of consumption" (Jackson,

1995:1875) and an evolving theoretical field. I continue here with an investigation into those transformations paying particular attention to the impact of globalisation on new modes of production, retailing and consumption and the ways in which a simple global concept is now bowing under the pressure of more nuanced and culturally-led perspectives.

Until the recent cultural turn in geography, only a handful of half-hearted gestures towards consumption studies had been made, and these were relegated to a poorly developed retail geography (Jackson and Thrift, 1995; Lowe and Wrigley, 1996) across which 'spectacular' sites of consumption and commodification were writ large. For example, eulogistic accounts of shopping malls as cathedrals of late-capitalist consumption (Goss, 1993; Gottdeiner, 1986) were part of a vogue in elegant semiotic analyses of the built environment, emphasising the serial reproduction of an over-designed urbanism and the theme-parkisation of both retail space and popular culture. Kowinski (1978:144) gives a particularly frothy account of the North American mall describing it in terms of a,

"never-never land, a huge plastic bag in which all the proper factors can be arranged to summon up the right consumer myths so that the mall becomes an absolutely vital part of the lives and lifestyle of the Me People, wherever they may be".

(Kowinski, 1978:144).

Such fantastical reviews belong to a school of thought that has attributed the sanitised, supervised and strictly regulated spaces of the single retail site as being a consequence of global forces and their generation of uniformity and blandness. Globalisation has been said to result in a (well-documented) erosion of local uniqueness and has produced spatial homogeneity in which the tyranny of the megamall, the department store and the



conspicuous fashion brand is all consuming (see Harvey, 1989; Hopkins, 1990; Ritzer, 1993; Sack, 1988; Sorkin, 1992). The ubiquity of fashion labels such as Gap, Benetton and Levi's lays testimony to the homogenising influences of a rapidly globalising marketplace in which a 'logo' culture and its practises of conspicuous consumption progress with little regard for location or space (Crewe and Lowe, 1996). In this view, there is a basic sameness to global culture and an attendant standardisation of consumer commodities (Robins, 1991) that shatters cultural unevenness and that glosses over local histories and traditions.

Here, the global consumer becomes a clone, "relegated to the role of hapless dupe" (Jackson, 1995: 1875) and victim of the coercive and compelling powers of a unitary world, or alternatively the consumer is viewed in heroic terms, denouncing globalisation and properting to "a kind of vacuous moralising" (Jackson and Thrift, 1995:220). These studies have stripped consumers of any real human agency, conceiving them as passive and singular and as mere pawns in the hands of faceless hidden persuaders (Jackson and Holbrook, 1995). This dualism of 'consumer as dupe/consumer as hero' is part of a thesis that equates globalisation to homogenisation - a thesis which has gone so far as to prescribe local cultures as the 'victims' of a rape script in which globalisation is assigned the penetrative role of capitalist invader (Gibson-Graham, 1998) - and a thesis that needs reworking in more multiple and complex ways (Cox, 1997; Crewe and Lowe, 1995; Crewe and Lowe, 1996; Crewe and Beaverstock, 1998).

Among many, Featherstone, (1990) for example, suggests that doubt has been cast on the continuing usefulness of this oversimplistic 'take' on globalisation. The emerging microgeographies of consumption - the trend towards lifestyle and the cultivation of the

self that I have already mentioned - means that more intricate explanations of global-local exchanges and the politics of consumption are required. The recurring myth of globalisation as a sinister, threatening presence (or alternatively as a playful piece of mere froth) fails to capture an increasingly textured global culture which moves beyond the presentation of localisms as stereotyped "jingoistic forms" (Massey, 1995a: 49) and beyond the portrayal of locals as wearisome "lumpen consumers" (Mort, 1996: 8). Indeed dominant portrayals seem to have focused almost entirely on the morbid and degrading effects of globalisation, treating commodification as a "dirty word" (Jackson, 1999:95) and the global corporation as a "dirty old man" (Angell in Braham, 1997:54). Arguing that acts of consumption, and shopping in particular, have only been written about in terms of domestic labour with its connotations of drudgery and exhaustion, McRobbie (1989) calls for an engagement with the notion of shopping as a pleasurable act and as a source of fun and expression. Wilson (1985) takes up this plea in reference to the consumption of fashion and its gender relations, emphatically denying fashion as a mode of female oppression and instead theorising it as an anarchic tool, a powerful weapon of resistance and also as an enjoyable, even hedonistic activity. Carter (1979) shares a similar view and goes some way in dislodging the moralistic stance where shopping as enjoyment or entertainment is denigrated and seen as the seduction of passive females by a capitalist system of false needs.

Shopping and the consumption of fashion, then, need not necessarily be equated with metaphors of slavery and the victimisation of consumers. Furthermore the choosing, the 'hunting out', the trying on of different commodities, together with the increasingly bandied view of shopping as a 'leisure pursuit' - particularly with the skyward rise in popularity of discount clothing villages and their "lure of the bargain with a touch of

class" (Barker, 1997:54), the notion of 'chic on the cheap', or the magnetism of Sunday trading, all offering even greater access to goods and services - means there is much more to the purchasing and buying of fashion than the mere exchange of hard cash. Gregson and Crewe (1994:261), for example, have labelled car boot sales as being the "new social spectacle" of the 1990s, whilst Jackson and Holbrook, (1995) have engaged in an empirically grounded analysis of the social uses of shopping centres. This latter study is especially pertinent, since Jackson and Holbrook draw out the bewilderingly numerous experiences and identities that each individual shopper may acquire during the consumption process. As a result, they argue for a rejection of the false dichotomies on which traditional conceptions of identity have been built and instead put forward a 'plurality of identities' in which there is a "continual smudging of personas and lifestyles, depending on where we are...and the spaces we are moving between" (Mort, 1989:169).

### **2.3 Less Spectacular Fashion: Going beyond the big hair**

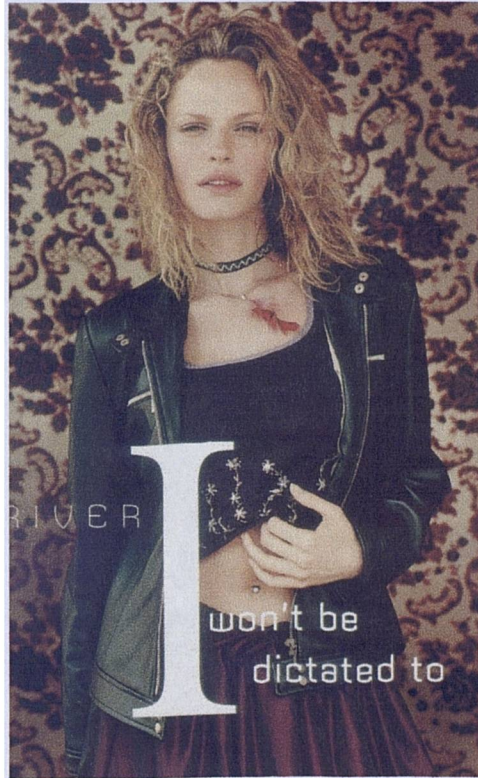
Within a more pluralistic picture, the fashion industry, trivialised as we have already seen both in an industrial setting (chapter one) and in intellectual circles (see above) as a mere surface effect (Raban, 1974; Wark, 1991) may be nominated exemplar of the nuanced dialogues between the local and global. Braham (1997) for example suggests that the very nature of the fashion industry offers a unique insight into the complexities of the global scene, at once able to commentate on and to question: the global corporation; portraits of standardised production and passive consumption; issues over the new international division of labour *and* the 'power geometry' of globalisation linked to an assumption that everyone in a borderless world has equal resonance (Braham, 1997). Fashion, finds itself in an intriguing position, globally ubiquitous yet specialised

and differentiated, its global reach and influence concomitant with matters of a more proximate nature to do with notions of the self, personal identity and the immediate spaces of our lifeworlds. Through this most paradoxical of relationships, the globalisation of fashion, written off as 'dulling down' diversity and difference, finds itself in need of more rigorous modes of conceptualisation. In this mobile and more plural consumer world, the once impassable dialectic of the global and the local has begun to be reconfigured, its inveterate polarisation now recognised as being grossly inadequate in a marketplace which values individuality above all else and where heterogeneity is key (Zukin, 1991). These new configurations have been articulated by Crewe and Lowe (1995:1879) whereby,

"on the one hand the globalisation of retailing continues to weave complex interdependencies between geographically distant locations and tends towards global interconnectedness and dedifferentiation. On the other hand new patterns of regional specialisation are emphasising the importance of place and reinforcing local uniqueness".  
(Crewe and Lowe, 1995:1879)

What we are seeing here, with this intricately balanced relationship between the global and local is part of a backlash against the oppressive dictates of omnipresent and entrenched global corporations. Particularly in the directional world of fashion, the emergent sentiment is of a departure from uniformity towards an eclecticism of styles. If it is different, it is good. To cite some examples, the Spring/Summer 1999 Sisley collection sold its high fashion, ready-to-wear clothes with the slogan, 'A man flattened by an opponent can get up again. A man flattened by conformity stays down for good'. In the same way, the high street retailer River Island endorses the trend towards individualism, its Spring/Summer 2000 campaign (figure 11) featuring a moody, biker-

*Figure 11: River Island ad campaign, Spring/Summer 2000. River Island, a middle-market high fashion chain captured the spirit of the times with this campaign. The slogan 'I won't be dictated to' plugged directly into a consumer vogue for diversity and for standing out from the crowd. What is interesting is that this campaign also signalled a wider renaissance for River Island, with these ads being used to launch the company's nation-wide retail refurbishment and modernisation programme.*



jacketed female under the caption 'I won't be dictated to'. The overriding message here is one of personal choice and a freedom of self expression, of a new found confidence where consumers know what they want and are encouraged to get it (see also chapters five and six and my discussions on emerging 'taste communities' and their methods of autodidacticism). Thus, set against the trumpeting of homogeneity and alongside the exhibitionism and extravagance associated with the conspicuous consumption brand, is the need for a now more comprehensive profile of the fashion scene, one which is attuned to the subtleties and fragmentations of current changes and one which also acknowledges the networks of interlinkages between them.

According to Franklin (1999:40) the globalisation of fashion has been dominated by a mind-set coined as the "big hair and push-up bra syndrome" - a syndrome that points to a lack of integrity in both the promotion and conceptualisation of clothing intent only on 'playing up' dazzling, attention-grabbing styles at the expense of more subtle or simply 'alternative' fashion statements. The perceived global dominance of flagrant designer brands has therefore eclipsed more complex explanations of locally sensitive and flexibly specialised modes of clothing provision and consumption. Similarly, column inches are predominantly given over to the dramatic gestures of crazy high-fashion couturiers (such as Vivienne Westwood). Or, for example, Andrew Groves (figure 12) and his infamous dresses made entirely of razor-blades, his 1998 catwalk show called 'Cocaine Nites' or his jackets which unzip to release swarms of barely-live flies (Frankel, 1998) - these dubious stunts, set to court controversy, overshadow less spectacular, but just as vibrant, modes of dressing, retailing and consumption.

Consider for example, the realm of second-hand dressing, mail-order shopping, the charity-shop and car boot sale. These potent sites offer challenges to many of the conventions related to more formalised consumption practices that have been so easily explained away under the spectre of homogenisation and through the showmanship of hype-hungry high fashion. However, no longer do these straightforward explanations stand up against the demands of a transforming marketplace, geared towards 'lifestyle' and the passions of a new middle-class bourgeoisie and therefore, as I have already hinted, the tide is turning, making way for new motions towards more locally informed and multiple portraits of consumption and the people who consume. Gregson and



*Figure 12: Andrew Groves' 'Flies Under the Jacket' (London Fashion Week, September, 1997). This jacket, stuffed with 500 flies, formed part of Groves' debut collection and was a calculated publicity stunt to kick-start his career. The tactics worked, with the Mirror newspaper reporting the following morning that "Who bares wins"; The Daily Mail screaming "Does British fashion really need stunts like this?" and The Independent proclaiming "Shock! Horror! Just another day on the catwalks...Clothes? Who needs them when you can grab the headlines with a good old-fashioned dose of shock factor" (Rickey, 1997: 16).*

Crewe, (1994) for example have called for a new focus to consumption studies that goes 'beyond the high-street and the mall' specifically looking at cycles of use and re-use, whilst Miller (1987) and Jackson (1995) similarly argue that there is a deficiency of research on the consumption process that goes on before and after the isolated act of purchase, positing consumption as an extremely social process whereby people relate to goods in complex ways, transforming their meaning as they incorporate them into their lives. Leslie and Reimer (1997; 1999) go some way in extending this notion and their work on the home-furnishings industry recognises the home, as a 'post-purchase' site, to

be a focal point in the creation of self-identity, whilst Cook (1994), traces the process of consumption back into the 'pre-purchase' social relations of production drawing on examples from the transnational exotic fruit business. These studies offer a point of departure for richer geographies of consumption where the *intricacies* of different 'commodity chains' are a characterising feature.

#### **2.4 The Ever-Lengthening Commodity Chain**

Fine (1993: 600) has explored the "commodity specific chain connecting production, distribution, marketing...and the material culture surrounding these elements". This notion of the 'commodity chain' is extremely useful in debates on the circulation of goods and the creation of their specific meanings and lifestyles. The concept views the provision of different commodities as an essentially global - and therefore - mobile phenomenon, not as a self-contained entity but rather as an extremely intricate 'system' involving an ever-lengthening network of chains to do with the designing, producing, retailing, marketing, advertising and consuming of a particular commodity. Hartwick (1998:425) puts forward a definition in which,

"geographically conceived, commodity chains consist of significant production, distribution, and consumption nodes, and the connecting links between them, together with social, cultural, and natural conditions involved in commodity movements. In this concept the generation of cultural (signifying, representational) effects at the consumption node is integrated with the social and natural conditions at the production end of the chain; the purpose being to show the effects of one on the other, 'bringing home' to consumers the results of consumption". (Hartwick, 1998:425)

In a similar vein, Fine and Leopold (1993) call for a more 'vertical' approach to thinking about commodity chains. They adopt a view in which 'systems of provision' have a depth and complexity that is globally far-ranging and also non-linear - a virtually



endless 'circuit of consumption' in which the different sites on and in these chains are inextricably intertwined. Glennie and Thrift (1993) suggest such consumption chains possess an inherent 'leakiness'. They see such chains as being far from mutually exclusive and argue that, contrary to perennial debates, these chains cannot easily be explained away by some meta-concept that views the consumptive process merely as a momentary 'act of purchase'. By employing a commodity chain approach to the subject of consumption, I think we begin to see how meaningful identities are not simply 'glossed on' to the surface of a product via extravagant marketing strategies, as previously inadequate concepts have suggested. Instead, I believe we see how marketing images are one small part of a larger system and how the production of identity is an on-going process, continually being made and re-made across and between all the stages that go to frame a commodity. As Jackson and Holbrook (1995:1914) write, "the meanings that goods and artefacts acquire are not free-floating but linked in identifiable ways to the social relations of production and consumption".

When we turn to the commodity chains of the fashion industry, the ambiguous and ironic exchanges between sites are particularly potent. As I proposed in chapter one (section 1.4), the rumblings of intolerance towards essentialising régimes are slowly gaining pace and seldom are the meanings in fashion ever fixed or stable. The idea of *bricolage* is especially evident in this creative field with fashion having little, if any, regard for geographical or historical constraints when searching for inspiration. Craik (1994: ix-x; Hebdige, 1979) expands on this idea, confirming that notions of mixing and pastiche are absolutely inherent to the fashion industry where,

"designers are constantly searching for new ideas, themes and motifs from historical dress, non-European dress, popular culture and subcultures. Like birds of prey, they rob

the nests of other fashion systems in a process of appropriation and cannibalisation. These stylistic motifs are then reconstituted in a process of *bricolage*, the creation of new patterns and modes from the kaleidoscope bits and pieces of cultural debris".

(Craik, 1994:ix-x)

Paralleling these ideas of mixture and exchange is the disruptive character of the globalisation process itself in fashion. With globalisation, we find international cultural elements jostling alongside national and regional influences, thereby combining different spatial scales and furthermore, compressing time and space in order for new connections to be made and new claims to be forged (Allen, 1995; Massey, 1991b; Massey, 1995b; Meegan, 1995; Robins, 1991). Fashion designers and the cultural intermediaries found throughout the industry are the first to exploit this interconnectedness, with their 'magpie mentality' intent on "plundering the world of its ideas" (Jones, D., 1995c: 22), they are continually involved in a process of manipulation and the reinvention of meanings, borrowing from an array of different cultural, spatial and temporal influences that emerge in a variety of forms across seasonal collections. This picking and mixing of themes and motifs, the juxtaposing of symbols of change and continuity, refute all notions of the homogeneity attributed to globalising cultural industries. Further still, this mediation runs the gamut of fashion and its systems of provision. For invention and reinvention is a grounding element in the commodity chains found here. From the angora farm to the drawing board and design brief, through the homemaker's kitchen table to the shop window in a far-flung continent, the meaning of a commodity is mutable and multiple. Wayne Hemingway, commander-in-chief of the street label 'Red or Dead', expands still further on this idea. He articulates this notion of re-invention and the mobility of meaning in fashion with an example from second-hand dressing (see chapter five) and the way in which powerful style statements are still generated far beyond the institutional realms of the corporation or boutique.

According to Hemingway, the true "mothers of invention" are the "loads of cool people dressed by the local Cats Protection League shop" (Brooks, L., 1998:4), people who have found new meanings for clothing that others have deemed either symbolically or practically redundant - the circuit of consumption being endless.

## **2.5 Changing Tastes: The new petite bourgeoisie**

So we see that "consumer goods have a significance that...rests largely in their ability to carry and communicate cultural meaning" and that this meaning "has a mobile quality" that is "constantly in transit" across the spaces and places of the commodity chain (McCracken, 1986:71). Jackson and Thrift, (1995:227) develop this idea and in so doing, they bring us back to the search for individuality, highlighting how the very mobility of meaning is crucial to the workings of contemporary consumption and its obsession with the self and the pursuit of a commodified lifestyle with which to identify. They write that,

"we define ourselves by what we buy and by the meaning that we give the goods and services that we acquire. But there is no essential, one-to-one, correspondence between particular commodities and particular identities: the same commodity can have radically different meanings for different individuals and for the same individual over time. Advertising and marketing campaigns have begun to realise this in targeting their products to specific niches. But rather than targeting particular market segments by associating their product uniquely and unambiguously with a particular lifestyle, they are increasingly trying to position their products in order to take advantage of the ambiguous and shifting boundaries of people's identities. As the industry's paper *Campaign* put it: 'Lifestyle advertising is about differentiating oneself from the Joneses, not as in previous decades keeping up with them'. (Jackson and Thrift, 1995:227)

The chief impetus for this new form of consumer rivalry, the compelling desire for differentiation at all costs, may be attributed in part to the rise of a new class fraction, a group that Bourdieu has labelled as the 'new petite bourgeoisie' (Bourdieu, 1984).

These new middle classes, evolving from the increased fluidity between imposed class structures, have been characterised as the 'cheerleaders' of new modes of consumerism (Jackson and Thrift, 1995), keen to indulge in the actualisation of particular lifestyles that may be purchased through commodified goods and services aimed at specific niche groupings (Leiss *et al*, 1986; Shields, 1992b; Tomlinson, 1990). These mechanisms of identification have been facilitated, I believe, through the transformation in recent years of manufacturing and signifying practices, most clearly seen with the shift from Fordism to post-Fordism. The growing emphasis on communication and information technologies symptomatic of time-space compression and the 'speeding-up' of a globalising world, has resulted in a shift away from standardised techniques of mass production to more specialised systems of carefully targeted provision. This move from principally industrial economies to ones which are information and service led have been extremely influential in the shaping of the contemporary fashion industry, impacting at many levels across its commodity chains (Phizacklea, 1990; Purvis, 1996) and signalling the demise of the mass-market.

Braham (1997) puts forward the idea that a number of distinct epochs, defined by their techniques of production and consumption, may be charted across the entire history of fashion. Beginning with Simmel's (1973 [1904]) depiction of a Parisian-based and socially prestigious model of *élite* fashion with its highly skilled craft production methods (see section 2.7 for a more detailed discussion of Simmel's theory of class fashion), Braham identifies the current trend of segmented consumption and flexible production as a progression away from Fordist methods and contentions. Much has been made, for example, of the gazumping of Britain's high street old-timer - and once invincible market staple - Marks and Spencer. With a year-on-year drop in sales of

between 15 and 18 per cent, M&S have been widely recognised as "in trouble" (Polan, 1999a: 49). Marks and Spencer built a reputation on good value and high quality clothing, combining low-cost styles with "an anticipatory sense of fashion" (Kay, 1987; Rees, 1969: 193): nothing too avant-garde or too over-designed, rather the emphasis being on dependability, reliability and "sure touch and sure taste" (Rees, 1969: 193). This was made attainable through the large-scale initiatives and economic maximisation strategy of mass manufacturing for the mass market. In 1987 Kay argued that the greatest threat to M&S came from the, then burgeoning, designer revolution with its niche marketing and flexibly specialised consumption methods. The power of an emerging 'new' middle class meant that louder demands were being made for more targeted fashion that would turn growing economic capital into meaningful symbolic capital - in the cut and thrust of a pacier globalising world, mainstream, neutral and commonplace style was deemed undesirable, even objectionable, and in turn, the new 'lifestyle' branding triggered a downward spiral (in both profits and reputation) for M&S, generating headlines such as 'Marks loses its Sparks' (Polan, 1999b:9). The latest adjunct to this story, however, illustrates that Marks and Spencer have begun to see that greater design and lifestyling is the way forward to increased market competitiveness and the fulfilling of consumer demands. Preparing to cast off their mass market legacy, Sheilagh Brown, the company's director in charge of womenswear design, recently provided a telling commentary, emphasising the company's reticence over the exploitation of a new consumer 'attitude' and 'taste', stating that,

"We used to try to please everyone with the same garment,' she says. 'Now we are targeting parts of what is a huge collection of different customers. We are identifying them, not by old-fashioned methods, such as age or income, but by attitude and taste...we are looking at our customers' lifestyles and trying to anticipate their needs.' Which is what their business rivals have been doing for some time."

(Brown, quoted in Polan, 1999:9)

According to Bourdieu (1986), taste - the 'tapping' of which is so crucial to the contemporary fashion company - is inherently related to class, something inherited or acquired through the prevailing social climate to which we are exposed (see chapter five for a more detailed discussion of some of the class relations specific to British fashion). Commercial goods, such as clothing, then, have come to be infused with values and properties that are either explicitly, or implicitly class related, our taste for cultural goods therefore forming an important component through which we express our own way of being in the world and our relationship with others - a way of constructing and expressing our lifestyles (a concept that took on special resonance during my own ethnographic research experiences within the fashion industry, see figure 13). Bourdieu's (1984; 1986) concept of the 'habitus' is particularly helpful here, a concept in

*Figure 13: Methodology Box  
Dressing the Part*

**Dressing the Part**

The habitus of clothing proved to be an on-going source of concern during my own ethnographic forays into the fashion industry. As I argued in section 2.5, clothing can negotiate and convey different senses of being and is one of the fundamental mechanisms through which identity is constructed and played out. Therefore my own decisions over 'what to wear' when interviewing, working and researching within the fashion industry are worthy of some discussion here since they raise wider issues about 'field relations' and 'impression management' both in ethnographic study and in the fashion industry.

Walsh (1998: 226) tells us that ethnographic research requires the construction of "an impression that facilitates observation and avoids producing obstacles". He argues that in order to create optimum field relations, the ethnographer should carefully consider how to go about presenting those negotiable characteristics of identity such as dress, demeanour, speech and habits. Put simply, the researcher needs to 'fit into' the environment they are researching so as not to come across as alien or threatening.

It was with some trepidation, therefore, that I dressed for my encounters in the fashion industry and with the people who worked there. Not least, I was aware of my student status and the fact that my limited financial means was reflected within my own wardrobe - a rather motley affair that could not possibly compete with what I thought was to be the designer dress and formal codes of my élite research subjects.

One of my first pieces of 'fieldwork' was a period of participant-observation at Life PR, the well-known and highly regarded public relations company whose clients, among others, are the British Fashion Council and the top-notch fashion designers Ronit Zilkha, Philip Treacy and Tommy Hilfiger. I had no face-to-face contact with any Life employees before my official starting date with the company as all my access had been negotiated via a mutually known

gatekeeper on my behalf. This meant I had few clues as to what regular PR office dress consisted.

The week before embarking on my participant-observation, I telephoned Life to confirm my research arrangements (my start date, the location of the Life offices etc) and broached the subject of 'what to wear' by asking if the company had 'any dress code'. I was told to wear 'whatever I fancied' and therefore decided that the 'safest' option was to dress entirely in black - the colour favoured (so I had read in the popular press) among *fashionistas* and one that avoided making any 'major' fashion statement.

On my arrival at Life, I found that I was one of two students who were to begin work on the company's 'fashion desk' that day. Both Claire (the other student) and I were considerably more smartly dressed than our fellow co-workers and our 'suited and booted' appearance visibly marked us out as 'outsiders' within the company. To my surprise, the majority of Life employees were very casually attired and sported jeans and trainers to the office. I had envisaged that these 'fashion-types' would be impeccably turned out in incredibly stylish and expensive designer numbers. However, it is in this misjudgement between my *anticipated* vision of PR employees dress and the *actual* clothing that I discovered was worn in this environment that an interesting further point on the techniques of habitus and the manipulation of dressed identities might be made.

The Life PR office had a large showroom annexed to the main office building. This showroom was a breeze-block shell that housed samples of the fashion client's latest collections. These samples (usually one of each design in a standard women's size 10) were continually used and re-used to promote the designer in question. So if, for example, a magazine such as *Vogue* wished to photograph some current designs by Ronit Zilkha, a selection of samples from the Life showroom could be 'booked out' (rather like a lending library) and then returned at a later date to the showroom, ready to then be used in another promotion.

What is interesting is that the Life employees also made use of this 'booking out' system. Although they carried out their day-to-day office work in relatively unremarkable clothing, they frequently 'dressed up' for any important meetings or events using clothes borrowed from the showroom. Quite literally then, this booking out system was used so that they could go about 'looking the part' and present a suitably stylish and fashionable face when in public or when meeting influential people on official Life PR business.

There were, then, many levels of dress identities in operation at Life PR and this impression management through the calculated use of certain clothing in certain situations gives a fascinating example of the active manufacturing and portrayal of a desirable and suitable collective corporate identity through individual employees dress.

My anxiety over 'having nothing to wear' during my stint of participant-observation at Life was fuelled by my lack of knowledge about such 'backstage histories' of this organisation. For up until my placement at Life, I had only seen an approved, regulated and policed snapshot of the fashion world where its inhabitants seemed to be groomed to perfection and dressed to impress. It was only as a result of my time spent participating within that world that I became aware of some of the wider 'backstage histories' that contextualised that partial public snapshot - how different (dress) identities were 'worn' at different moments during the PR day - and how such fluid and changeable identities reflected a wider politics to do with 'fitting in' and 'playing the part'.

which codes of dress are viewed as technical devices that go to articulate the relationship between a body and its lived *milieu*. Habitus may be considered a socially constituted system that provides individuals with class-dependent, predisposed ways of

thinking about and categorising familiar and novel situations (Maffesoli, 1996; Mauss, 1973; Shilling, 1993). Featherstone (1987:64) expands on this idea telling us that,

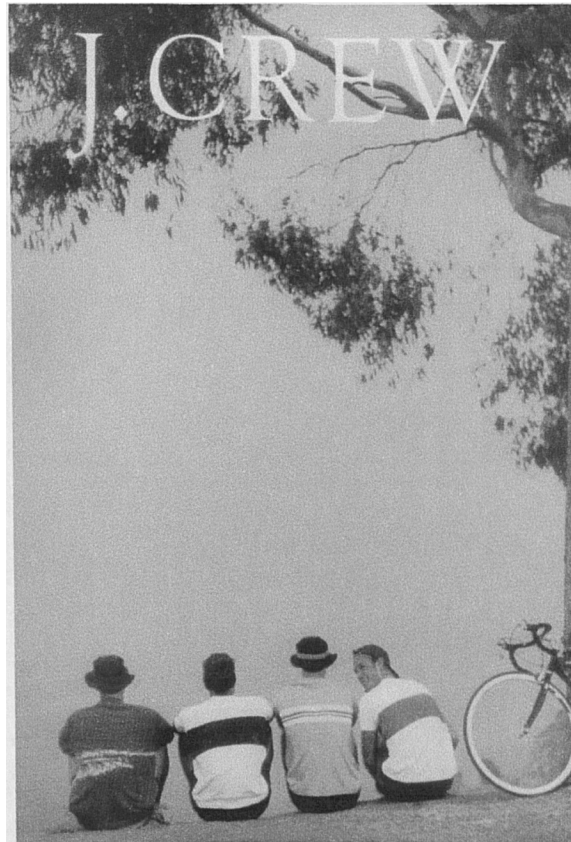
"'habitus' refers to specialised techniques and ingrained knowledges which enable people to negotiate the different departments of existence. Habitus includes the unconscious dispositions, the classification schemes, taken-for-granted preferences which are evident in the individual's sense of appropriateness and validity for his [*sic*] taste for cultural goods and practices as well as being inscribed on to the body through body techniques and modes of self-presentation." (Featherstone, 1987:64)

Clothing and fashion, then, is neither purely functional, nor is it an entirely superficial gloss involved only with outward appearance and surface display. Rather, fashion is a complex cultural construction involved with a constant negotiation and classification of different situations and spaces. The idea that fashion can convey choices of lifestyle is articulated by DeBord in his study of the North American mail order company, J.Crew (1997). He tells us that the depiction of an "instantly recognisable" (DeBord, 1997:291) J.Crew lifestyle is central to the company's ethic and success, the clothes themselves being rather unremarkable - aimed at customers stuck between unaffordable Ralph Lauren and unstylish L.L.Bean - but lifted into an altogether more visionary realm thanks to the stylish art direction of their sales catalogues. The J.Crew lifestyle is one based around a "Gestalt of the Casual" (1997:265), emphasising a weekend aesthetic based on portrayals of ease, relaxation, youthfulness, the wilful denial of self-consciousness and a distilled confidence (figure 14). According to DeBord, the J.Crew catalogue is about a convivial, invigorating way of life where models are at their ease, no matter what the setting: in underwear; the muddy outdoors; reading; sailing, or in the professional setting of the workplace. "This visual rhetoric of ease emphasises not only the intrinsic relaxation that will flow from the clothes, if they are purchased" writes DeBord, "but also the *transportability* of this ease" (1997:265) - J.Crew endorsing more



pluralistic approaches to commodity-identity relations where meanings are constantly in transit being flexibly produced and consumed.

*Figure 14: The J.Crew way of life. The stylish art direction of the J.Crew sales catalogue is exemplified here in the relaxed poses of these youthful J.Crew models.*



## **2.6 Folk is It: From roots to routes and back again**

The J.Crew catalogue is noted as being deeply nostalgic - a nostalgia that is said to subsume the neurosis attributed to a fast-track, metropolitan and commercial world. In Crew-land there is an ideology revolving around family life and the restoration of traditional, romantic values focusing on the molecular family unit, where all is healthy, cheery and harmonious. DeBord (1997:274) even suggests that J.Crew is a source of "solace", its emphasis on 'ease' being an antidote to the frenetic demands of the

"beleaguered" - catalogue poses are, for example, purposefully 'unstyled', clothing is crumpled and most importantly 'understatement' is a priority. There are discourses of nationalism running through the J.Crew catalogue, yet these are mere whispers - freedom of expression, the great outdoors and wholesome values, all part of American identity but kept to a low hum "without resorting to the usual Laurenisms or Hilfigerisms of plastering the Stars and Stripes on everything in sight or bedecking everyone in red, white, and blue" (DeBord, 1997:274-5).

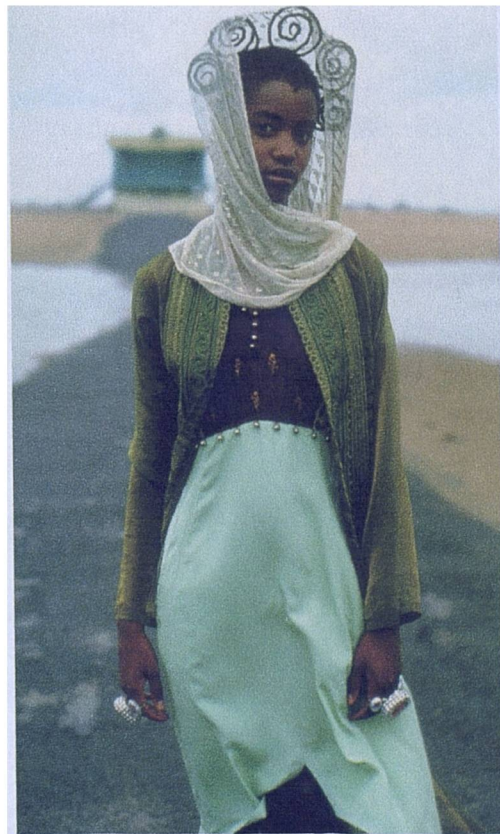
As I have illustrated, heightened importance is continually being placed on the notion of distinction and how we manifest our differences in the way we consume. The case of J.Crew, pedalling clean-cut American family fun, underscores how specific ideologies may be targeted at different 'taste communities' and how clothing may be niche marketed. However, the J.Crew example, with its deeply nostalgic references to the family unit and robust living, also reveals another important strand to the changing character of the globalising marketplace, namely, how the disorientation said to characterise global times has given rise to a reactionary search for stability, roots and the pursuit of a palpable sense of identity (Allen, 1995; Jameson, 1988; Lash and Urry, 1994; Massey, 1991b; Massey, 1994; Ohmae, 1990). In consequence, the niche marketing of fashionable lifestyle brands is one mechanism that has tapped into a consumer longing for "placed identities for placeless times" (Robins, 1991:38), with labels becoming invested with place-specific iconography and spatial meaning. Examples include, Prada and its associations with the Milanese café 'set'; Mary Quant and the bright young things of sixties London; Laura Ashley and rural Britain - particularly Wales, and Tommy Hilfiger's identification with the 'beautiful people' of sunny California. In buying these clothes we are able to acquire a sense of place and a

slice of locally-grounded identity, the return to roots marking out a search for coherent cultural asylum amidst the speed and chaos of high-flying global exchanges. Robins (1991) tells us that globalisation is about a growing mobility across frontiers, this mobility, in turn, making it ever more difficult to maintain coherent and well-bounded local cultures and places. Therefore, in view of this mobility, globalisation at the turn of the twenty-first century is often related to a reactionary emergence of local nostalgia through a magnification of vernacular styles and traditions, and the re-generation of neighbourhoods and inner-cities. This is symptomatic of a postmodern condition where fragmentation has led to "the search for secure moorings in a shifting world" (Harvey, 1990:302). In fashion too, a similar trend is evident, with F&B magazine, (Autumn/Winter 1999) under the headline "Folk is it!", urging us to "go back to your roots, because this season's look is deep, earthy, real" - the quest for authenticity, realness and depth assuming crucial importance in a fragmentary, postmodern world of signs (figure 15). Thus we see that the instabilities affiliated to globalisation have, in extension, generated feelings of insecurity and vulnerability, and that the 'folksy' look with its signposts to a bygone age, craft production and homespun charm is being actively employed to offset this apparent global rootlessness. Yet, the reactionary search for roots and familiarity - for a bit of peace and quiet in the middle of all the flux (Massey 1993) - is itself not an entirely unproblematic contention. I continue with a critique of this notion and examine how the pursuit of a sense of fixed identity has led to the production of 'wilful nostalgia', a backward looking and ultimately regressive formulation.

Philo and Kearns (1993) state that the construction of specific place identities revolves around the pivotal ingredient of history. This history is a valuable resource, something

to be fostered, emulated and re-kindled (Burgess and Wood, 1988), offering emotional and economic benefits to place consumers. According to Sadler (1993) a recent trend may be charted towards the packaging of particular local identities that draw specifically on a series of, real or imagined, cultural traditions (Sadler cites, for

*Figure 15: The search for roots in a fragmentary world has meant the folksy look has made it on to the catwalk. This particular example is by Rifat Ozbek, who visited North Africa, India and his own Turkish roots for this delicate outfit. A gauze cardigan is heavily braided and trimmed with cording. Underneath, a dress is embroidered with flowers and the raised waistband is dotted with beads. Since setting up his own label in 1984, Ozbek has been inspired by the clothing and decoration of a variety of cultures, from American Indian and South African Ndebele to Eastern European gypsy and Haitian voodoo. Having been brought up in Britain, Ozbek worked with the seminal 1970s designer Walter Albini in Italy before moving back to London to work for Monsoon, a chain store that specialises in designs manufactured in Indian fabrics.*



example, 1980s South Tyneside and its association with 'Catherine Cookson country', and the London Docklands development with popularist images of the East End and an industrial heritage). These traditions have, however, all too often been borne out of a

bourgeois memory that comes to be the sanctioned and, indeed, the only history of a given territory. Furthermore these traditions have insisted on connecting a 'sense of place' with memory, stasis and nostalgia, of building identity around relapsing references, rather than forging a progressive character drawing on new or changing links beyond its boundaries. As Massey (1994: 84) writes,

"Place' in this formulation was necessarily an essentialist concept which held within it the temptation of relapsing into past traditions, of sinking back into (what was interpreted as) the comfort of Being instead of forging ahead with the (assumed progressive) project of Becoming". (Massey, 1994: 84)

These nostalgic views of place have been derived from Heideggerian notions that fail to account for multiple identities and contested histories. Instead, places are viewed as having fixed meanings and of being constructed out of inward-looking histories based on delving into the past for internalised origins (Massey, 1993). The resulting neatly bounded and place-specific identities, although serving to ease the anxieties and insecurities of some global dwellers, have also succeeded in generating extremely exclusive visions of places and who belongs there - an act of tribalism where struggles over identity have led to what Featherstone (1993) terms as 'we-images' and 'they-images' in an attempt to exclude perceived outsiders and to foster notions of purity. This desperate propagation of a sanitised and bounded history has given rise to an unprogressive sense of place, theorised as being necessarily reactionary and as little more than a costume drama in which "the past...seems to be up for grabs, a chest of props and togs ready-to-wear" (Porter, 1992:1). Harvey (1990:303) expands on this idea, pointing out that,

"tradition is now often preserved by being commodified and marketed as such. The search for roots ends up at worst being produced and marketed as an image, as a simulacrum or pastiche (imitation communities constructed to evoke images of some folksy past)... At best, historical tradition is reorganized as a museum culture...of local production, of how things once upon a time were made, sold, consumed and integrated into a long-lost and often romanticized daily life (one from which all trace of oppressive social relations may be expunged)". (Harvey, 1990:303)

Here we see how traditional studies of a sense of place have been tainted by their yearning for lost authenticity and an exaggerated emphasis on memory (Jackson, 1999); where competing power hierarchies and contested social relations have been expunged, and where the sentimental longing for 'folksy' constructions has brought about a kind of caricaturing of local cultures. What is required, then, in order to encourage much more dynamic and outward-looking portraits of identity, is a hybrid version of local culture where places are given their specificity not by "some long internalized history" but by the fact that they are "constructed out of a particular constellation of relations, articulated together at a particular locus" (Massey, 1993:66). In short, the identity of places is forged out of their positive interrelations with elsewhere, the emphasis not being on 'roots' but 'routes', progression and mobility (Hall, 1995).

The hunt for a sense of place, therefore, need not necessarily be theorised as a reactionary or defensive gesture. Rather, places and their representation can be imagined as flows and linkages with the world beyond. Intimately bound up with this more fluid approach to the conception of places is a parallel realignment of the voices involved in the making, shaping and recounting of these complex flows. It is crucial to interrogate, as I did in relation to geography and geographers at the beginning of this chapter, to whom these voices belong and accordingly to examine the distribution of power in the production of local knowledge, place and history. As Hannerz (1996)

questions, just who are the guardians of continuity and what are the agents of change? Dominant explanations of changing global-local relations have often been reduced to the compression of time and space resulting from the overwhelming internationalisation of capital. Here, capitalism is said to determine our understandings and our experiences of space and place, to have 'speeded up' global exchanges and to have nurtured a world where the mobility of money is the constant and pervasive denominator (Jameson, 1984; Harvey, 1990; Massey, 1991b). Yet this version of an all-consuming global economy that is centred around the dealings and transactions of a largely western world is deeply insufficient in its scope and portrays only a snapshot of a far more complex and uneven range of experiences - experiences in which there is more than one global space and where its arbitrary capitalist centre is unseated and reworked. As Allen (1995:127) points out, in the past there has been an extremely skewed and misplaced account of global geography centred on the so-called 'developed' countries of the West. Yet clearly,

"not everyone is tied to into the global time and space of the rich, industrial countries, yet...if you are outside of *their* global geography, you are somehow not part of the global process".  
(Allen, 1995:127)

There is far more determining how we experience space than the processes and effects of capital with its materialist implications. More broadly this means that the characterisation of time-space compression itself needs to be reviewed in order to account for social differentials such as gender and race (Massey 1991b; 1993). Sivanandan (in Jackson, 1993) takes up this argument with specific reference to the theorisation of consumption, criticising studies as being extremely élitist in their blanket statements about the spiralling rise of numbers participating in the 'consumer game'.

Whilst growing affluence and heightened levels of disposable income during the latter half of the twentieth century spurred a 'consumer revolution' for many, quite literally, 'upwardly-mobile' social groups, (jet-setters, business people, journalists and academics), the remainder, whilst often still being exceptionally mobile (refugees, asylum seekers, migrant workers and the homeless), were excluded and silenced in these partialised, westernised portraits. Thus, it is possible to see that time-space compression is not experienced by everyone across all spheres of activity, an observation that Massey (1991b:25-6) has coined as the 'power-geometry' of time-space compression whereby different people are placed in relation to the 'shrinking world' in variable and complex ways. She writes that,

"different social groups, and different individuals are placed in very distinct ways in relation to these flows and interconnections. This point concerns not merely the issue of who moves and who doesn't, although that is an important element of it; it is also about power in relation *to* the flows and movement. Different social groups have distinct relationships to this anyway differentiated mobility: some people are more in charge of it than others; so initiate flows and movement, others don't; some are more on the receiving-end of it than others; some are effectively imprisoned by it".

(Massey, 1991b: 25-6)

This power-geometry illustrates the nuances of the entire globalisation process and the multitude of extremely different experiences that go to constitute it. I continue now with a closer look at how fashion fares against what has been a largely Eurocentric backdrop, first of all by examining the theorisation of fashion back to its formal appearance during the latter half of the eighteenth century and then by looking at the ways in which these superior conceptions of fashion may be contested and critiqued, specifically with the application of more pluralistic and mobile approaches to cultural and commodity 'trafficking'.



## 2.7 Trickling Down: Fashion and its history of class struggle

*Figure 16: Alexander McQueen's spring/summer 1998 collection. The 'enfant terrible' of fashion has made his name through the mixing of often seemingly disparate styles with shocking effects. Here McQueen has used a slash-and-burn technique on a distressed leather tunic - a look inspired by gothic culture that subverts couture's codes on immaculate presentation and fine finishing.*



Vivienne Westwood's career in fashion is characterised, as discussed in chapter one, by a host of ambiguities. The 'grande dame' of the couture scene, Westwood still borrows from the radical underworld of punk and revolutionary style where she first launched that career. Westwood is not alone in her mixing of haute couture and streetstyles and the two spheres, although frequently pitted against each other, are not entirely separate poles, with couture often relying on subcultural 'looks' for its inspiration. Alexander McQueen, for example, made his name with morbid runway shows inspired by gothic

culture (figure 16) whilst Red or Dead's 1999 collections showcased clothing in sludgy, institutional colours like 'UPS [an international haulage company] brown', an immeasurably drab, functional and - ironically - purposefully unfashionable delivery-person's uniform triggering the inspiration for a look at the very cutting edge of seasonal style. This juxtaposing and rupturing of styles drawn from a wealth of sources suggests that the traditional notion of fashion spreading, in an outward and downward motion, from the creative and pecuniary centre of a Parisian catwalk, fails to capture the tensions and confusions of a truly global fashion scene. The belief that fashion has an identifiable - Paris-based and haute couture - centre, where designs and influences move out geographically and down socially, no longer reflects the character of fashion. Therefore in a contemporary world where we are confronted by "new modes of fashionability in a far more widely dispersed information landscape" (Wark, 1991:62) the diffusion of fashion does not simply 'trickle down' but it also 'bubbles up' making for far more polycentric versions of fashion.

The remainder of this chapter examines the history and development of formal fashion conventions in some detail. In particular it looks at, and critiques, the class hierarchies of traditional fashion theory, a debate that I will continue to return to in later chapters since it forms an important, and a contested, discourse in the inherent *Britishness* of British fashion. Fashion has characterised human culture since the very first adornments of the Upper Palaeolithic period, and experimental clothing is widely documented in most histories of fashion as a feature of Medieval times, symptomatic of the rise of mercantile capitalism in European cities of the fourteenth century (Beward, 1995; Craik, 1994; König, 1973; Laver, 1996 [1969]; Langner, 1991; Wilson, 1985). Yet the widely held contention of a fashion system defined through the tastes and

dictates of haute couture is traceable only to the 1850s and a 'classical tradition' headed by a man called Charles Frederick Worth in Paris. Worth was the very first fashion couturier, the great fashion dictator, who was the brains behind the 'couture house' system and the instigator of the 'new art' of fashion which functioned - unlike all previous style trends - independently outside of the royal courts (de Marly, 1980; Lynam, 1972; Milbank, 1985). Up until Worth's revolutionary intervention, new styles of dress were launched at court under the mandate of the presiding monarchy. The resulting modes of dress were not, however, haute couture pieces as defined by the classical tradition since artisans (such as tailors, sewing women and dressmakers) were not classed as *designers* and had no conceptual input into the sartorial ideas and requests of the city's socialites. Therefore the field of couture, or high fashion, where the designer is invested with the authority to make seasonal pronouncements, to flex their creative talents and to set trends, is considered to be a relatively latter-day formulation, emerging in what has long been regarded as its Parisian 'birthplace' during the mid to late 1800s.

However, as I will go on to show, this classical tradition, heavily characterised by a rigid class-structure and as an annex to the power relations of capitalist societies, only puts forward one version of 'fashion' amidst a wide variety of competing and contradictory descriptions and histories. Hence, as Craik (1994:xi) proposes the dominant record of 'fashion' as referring normatively, yet extremely problematically, to high or designer fashion (haute couture) is in need of revision. Craik writes that,

"European high (elite designer) fashion is one specific variant of fashion. Although it may dominate popular consciousness about fashion, other fashion systems co-exist, compete and interact with it. These incorporate other elite designer systems, for example, European settler (post-colonial) cultures; as well as non-European cultures;

and non-capitalist cultures. In short, the term fashion should be dissolved and reconstituted.... Treating fashion as a marker of civilisation, with all of its attendant attributes, is the reason why fashion has been excluded from the repertoires of non-western cultures. Other codes of clothing behaviour are relegated to the realm of costume which, as 'pre-civilised' behaviour, is characterised in opposition to fashion, as traditional, unchanging, fixed by social status and group-orientated". (Craik, 1994:xi)

Charles Frederick Worth fought hard to break the courtly monopoly on codes of dress and in so doing, institutionalised a fashion system, the hallmark of which was said to be 'change': "a continual and arbitrary succession of new styles and modes that render previous fashions obsolete" (Craik, 1994:x). Much has been made of this eighteenth century 'revolution' and the laying claim to Paris as the European 'home' of haute couture where the fashion *cognoscenti* supposedly reside over these successive and systematic changes. Narratives tell of the 'birth' of fashion and its 'founding' father and are keen to set out the parameters as to the constitution of haute couture, an apparently recent and welcome event, where true fashion has at last been recognised and defined. It is in this urgent need to define very tightly and delimit fashion that we find a telling debate over concerns for the strict maintenance of its class-based structure and the anxiety for it to be equated to a Parisian, 'trickle-down' model of couture. Here, we find a classical tradition intent on marking out couture as an élite, exclusive phenomenon resolutely positioned away from the less prestigious fields of lower class dress and its associated utilitarian wear. Corrigan (1997: 170) elucidates on this idea, writing that,

"if we accept that there are fashions for different classes, then we can see that fashion can fulfil the dual function of inclusion and exclusion at exactly the same time; it brings together all those who have adopted the fashion of a particular class or group, and excludes those who have not. Thus fashion produces similarity, union and solidarity within the group and the simultaneous segregation and exclusion of everyone else".  
(Corrigan, 1997:170)

The Parisian model of fashion, then, plays out this assumption that couture is, in large part, motivated by the desire for class distinction. The urge to very carefully define 'fashion' has been a deliberate exercise on behalf of the upper classes to maintain their status. Settle (1972) suggests that couture emerged as a reaction to the spiralling industrialisation of the late 1800s, when changes in social life and rapid urban growth brought a perceived threat to the class hierarchy. This undulating backdrop of industrial expansionism and its attendant class instabilities set the scene for a potent series of socio-economic struggles. Fashion, as a 'reproductive social practice' (Barnard, 1996), proved an important site over which these struggles were fought out.

In particular, the sociologist Simmel (1950; 1973 [1904]) provides an extremely helpful contribution to my own discussions over these class struggles. Simmel explicitly linked the development of fashion in clothing to urban life. The exchanges and relations of the expanding city were viewed ostensibly in mere monetary terms and city dwellers, in turn, were increasingly isolated and rendered anonymous through this system of abstract transactions (Elias, 1994 [1939]; Harvey, 1990; Packard, 1957; Simmel, 1973). The only outlet from this rapid urbanisation and the anonymity that the rational city brought about, was, according to Simmel, the cultivation of a 'sham individualism' where the pursuit of fashion and marks of individual eccentricity were to acquire a new found significance. Increasing emphasis, therefore, was placed on forms of personal freedom, modes of appearance, display and the management of impressions (de Certeau, 1984; Featherstone, 1991; Sennett, 1976). The search to communicate distinction through the acquisition of status symbols was especially significant, for in Simmel's analysis of the city, status, class aspiration and the 'chase and flight' by lower classes after the upper

(McCracken, 1988) meant the coding and judgement of outward appearances took on increasing importance.

To pursue this contention of fashion as an urban, capitalist phenomenon, it is possible to examine the 'trickle-down' model outlined by Simmel still further. Simmel's portrait of fashion was based on the premise that the prerequisite for fashion's existence was a relatively open society, consisting of several classes in which, as we have seen, an élite strives to separate itself from the bulk of the population by means of adopting observable signs, notably in dress. Due to the gathering momentum of an urban psyche and the ascendance of self-performance and techniques of appearing, fashion was to become a key area for struggles over status and the emulation of social betters: "unfortunately as soon as fashion percolated down to the bourgeoisie, it became disgusting to the rich" and therefore, "the rich moved on to something new which was in turn copied" (Wilson, 1985:49). Braham (1997:135), expands on this theme more explicitly still, explaining that the urban thirst for social improvement,

"has the effect of encouraging those closest to the elite to embrace these same signs in order to gain the superior status that is associated with the elite and they, in turn, are copied by those inferior in status to them; and so the process is repeated down through the social strata. To the extent that through this sequence of events the elite class loses its distinct identity, it is persuaded to devise new signs of differentiation and this sets off the entire cycle of demarcation and emulation once again. In this way what ensues is a continual and arbitrary succession of fashions, each of which marches inexorably to its doom".  
(Braham, 1997:135)

So, it is possible to see that the rapid and cyclical renewal of fashion is fed by the desire for distinction based on class superiority. Fashion is characterised by change. Élite fashion trickles down to the masses only to be abandoned, having reached a condition of "semiotic redundancy" (Wark, 1991:63). Barthes (1985:289), in his deeply ideological

study in which the gross expendability of fashion is deemed morally absurd, calls this the "special temporality" of fashion. A "vengeful present" is posited to disavow the past and make meaningless the signs of yesterday's fashion. The classical tradition, realised in the creative genius of Charles Frederick Worth and analysed by Simmel, underscores the importance of prestige in the operation of fashion. So, too, does it stipulate that a certain type of socio-economic environment is required, that of an open or capitalist system, for fashion to exist and thrive. Simmel also highlights the vital importance of 'change' in his concept of fashion and goes so far as to contend that the presence or absence of this continual cycle of change permits the distinction to be made between "primitive" societies where "conditions of life favour correspondingly infrequent change of fashions" and "civilised" societies where "whatever is exceptional, bizarre or conspicuous, or whatever departs from the customary norm, exercises a peculiar charm upon the man [*sic*] of culture" (Simmel, 1973:176). Through this distinction, Simmel sets up a dualism between primitive and civilised societies and crucially, these opposing societies are crystallised through the ability to support a fashion system as construed by an élitist or couture definition. For Simmel, fashion is one of the visual markers of western civilisation.

Writing around the same time as Simmel at the turn of the twentieth century, Veblen (1970 [1899]) put forward a theory of the 'leisure class'. In this theory, the frustrating cycle of redundancy and irrational change, termed as the 'abhorrent' futility of fashion, was viewed as being implicitly related to wealth. Veblen went about characterising what he felt was an acquisitive society, a society driven, not so much by the imposed aspects of, say, family lineage, class or individual talent, but rather a society where the notions of 'conspicuous leisure', 'conspicuous wealth' and 'conspicuous waste' were

features to be accrued and displayed. Here, according to Veblen, the ownership of economic wealth was everything, conferring prestige and status over and above cultural or inherited cachet. In this Veblenian view, fashion was seen as an essentially reproductive affair, being employed by the superior classes to construct, signal and reproduce their positions of leisured superiority.

In particular, Veblen was interested in fashion's engagement with the 'pecuniary strength' of different classes, suggesting that the ability continually to replace fashion, and the overwhelming repulsion for, and refusal of, social equalisation was a mechanism of distinction, a sign of 'conspicuous wealth' and pecuniary superiority. Veblen also argued that the seasonal and what he deemed to be hedonistic changes of fashion fundamental to 'modern' societies might be accounted for, in part, by his further concept of 'conspicuous waste'. This waste, with its compulsion to discard a garment before it had outlived its usefulness, and to conceive of clothing as fashion, rather than as serving a purely functional purpose was, according to Veblen, the irrational outcome of an urge to perform economic status. Therefore, followers of fashion were cast as necessarily wealthy, their extravagant pursuit of the latest 'look' requiring not only pecuniary strength and purchasing power but simultaneously also revealing a disregard for the thriftiness and frugality linked to more functional approaches to clothing. So we see that Veblen's ideology was centred on an extreme utilitarianism, one that condemned the follies of intensifying consumerism and one that similarly found the excesses of the fashion system, in their very absurdity, to be completely unjustifiable. This condemnation of fashion was equally evident in the parallel notion put forward by Veblen of 'conspicuous leisure'. Here, social worth was said to be considerably enhanced if a person could tangibly illustrate that they had no obligation to labour or



earn money, thereby in turn showing off their membership of the wealthy leisured classes. In particular, the fashions of this period - that is, of the late nineteenth century - were especially effective in marking out the unproductive image of the wearer since the physically restrictive and extremely cumbersome corseted bustle, (a look known as the 'S-bend' - see figure 17) considered as the height of *fin de siècle* fashion, was a contemporary mode of dress - a status symbol - embodying the very concept of conspicuous leisure with its tight, rigid bodice and heavily draped layers both inhibiting activity and reinforcing a non-labouring lifestyle (Cunnington, 1959; de Marly, 1980; Laver, 1996).



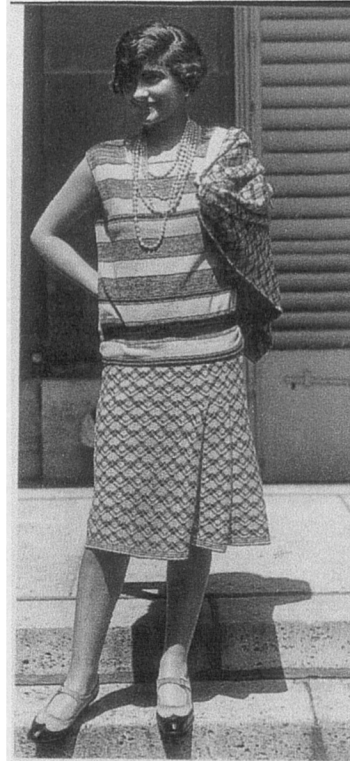
Figure 17: S-bend fashion (c. 1880)

Here we see how Veblen's ideological and extremely critical judgement of fashion revolved around a three-pronged theory of conspicuous leisure, conspicuous wealth and conspicuous waste. Veblen employed this terminology to show fashion as both

dysfunctional and ridiculous (a view shared by more recent radical critics of consumer culture such as Lasch, [1980] and Ewen, S. [1988] and Ewen, E. [1982]). This disapproval, fuelled by the idea that fashion served only an aesthetic and therefore contemptible purpose, was to send ripples across the entire course of fashion history. In 1881, for example, London saw the first formally organised campaign for dress reform (Laver, 1996; Newton, 1974). Known as the Rational Dress Society and advocating a similar utilitarian doctrine to Veblen, this movement was set to reform the 'S-bend' fashions of the day. Reform fashions, the epoch-making bloomers, divided cycling skirts and heel-less shoes were direct acts of defiance against the physically damaging and debilitating effects of strict, mainly female, fashion codes, but at the same time, and most pertinently here, through this refusal to employ fashion only as a performance of wealth, these reformers were also actively involved in posing challenges to the prevailing pecuniary basis of fashion. In particular, Veblen's notion of 'vicarious ostentation' - the way in which the luxurious and inconvenient costumes of wives and daughters were employed as lavish showcases through which to display male status - was no longer to be such a reliable and easily interpreted socio-economic marker. For these reforms with their championing of comfortable fashion and simple, practical styles meant that the old sartorial order, where manoeuvrability and good physical health went unheeded in the face of aesthetic peacockery, were confused under more utilitarian dictates, a measure of the changing social climate where, for example, women's fashion had to accommodate their increasingly active roles.

The incredibly successful French couturier, Coco Chanel, was a particularly influential figure in the actualisation of these functional styles. Chanel, the by-word for early

twentieth century women's fashion (figure 18), borrowed heavily from the ranks of traditional men's clothing in order to achieve her distinctive look, a look that was at the



*Figure 18: Coco Chanel. One of the most celebrated fashion designers of all time and ardent proponent of dress reform. Chanel is pictured here in the 1920s sporting her famous three-piece cardigan suit.*

height of fashion but that was also informed by the ideological conventions of the dress reformers. Chanel's signature fashions like beach pyjamas, bell bottoms and belted raincoats were all direct adaptations from traditional menswear, a domain characterised by simple lines and plain cloth, the very antithesis of the usual ostentation and impractical fashions imposed upon society women by boastful men (Wilson & Taylor, 1989). Chanel had little regard for the rules and hierarchies of the fashion world, frequently inverting longstanding traditions and rejecting the pecuniary snobbishness on which much of the fashion system had been borne. In 1916, for example, Chanel

pioneered a couture collection that featured jersey fabric, a previously overlooked and undervalued material, having been considered by other couturiers, due to its inexpensive price, as undesirable, ugly and worthless, suitable only for use in the making of hidden undergarments. Chanel, herself the embodiment of sartorial liberation, the archetypal *garçonne*, unmistakably slender, flat-chested, boyish and dressing in loose, comfortable fashions (de la Haye & Tobin, 1994; Laver, 1996; Mackrell, 1992; O'Hara Callan, 1998), went about muddying the rigid boundaries between male and female dressing and, unafraid to go against the lavish and sensational grain of contemporary trends also experimented with notions of understatement and quiet elegance, promoting what the fashion press refers to as 'stealth wealth' - a refinement of style where wealth is not so much conspicuously 'shown off' as gestured towards by the subtle and skilled use of sophisticated, understated signs and symbols. Thus Chanel's stealth wealth fashion, her eschewing of the corset, her revered 'little black dress' and the unaffected chemise, came to be regarded as icons of early twentieth century dress, making unprecedented marks on the world of female fashion and transforming its codes of display. Yet, what is particularly fascinating in this discussion of fashion as a marker of wealth, is the disdain with which Chanel's *avant-garde* creations were first met. Whilst Chanel was quick to achieve global acclaim and to bag her place in fashion's hall-of-fame, Franklin (1996) documents how her very first collections were initially derided and branded as 'the poor look', a reference to Chanel's comparative plainness against the usual lavish affectations of the period. It is in this labelling of Chanel's work that we find a compelling dialogue, one that feeds into the original comments made by Veblen on the inherently conspicuous nature of fashion and one that also shows how different ways of thinking about fashion were uneasily received. For whilst Chanel was eager to create simplicity, to employ cheaper fabrics and to explode the idea of couture as being a blazing beacon

of wealth, the reaction to her fresh 'take' on fashion was still overwhelmingly articulated in a distinctly pecuniary way - being referred to as the *poor* look. This suggests that simplicity of style, functionalism and plainness were still being viewed as highly undesirable traits in an enduring system geared towards conspicuous consumption. Here it seems that, for the classical tradition, plainness of dress was a marker of poverty, something only to be contemplated by members of those classes unable to economically afford the trappings of wealth. Fashion, on the other hand, was an indulgence of the leisured classes, a tool for the unambiguous, rather than stealthy, display of their wealth. Only the poor would risk being associated with a look outside of fashion, with functional and practical clothing becoming a symbol of their weakness in the socio-economic hierarchy as members of the working classes.

## **2.8 From Rucksack to Catwalk: Towards multiple systems of fashion**

My foregoing discussion outlined the historical derivation of a very specific schema for the definition of fashion - the equation of fashion to a trickle-down system of couture based on pecuniary status and the rapid and continual changing of styles. It is against this backdrop of very élitist definitions that I go on to discuss several competing portrayals of fashion, portrayals that are far messier and much more complex than the systematic and hierarchical approach we saw theorised by Simmel and Veblen. Polhemus and Procter (1978), for example, writing about the intricate decorations of the Sudanese Nuba tribe, suggest that the common anthropological rationale of 'frivolous' fashion as a purely western phenomenon both excludes and belittles the, often just as impractical and narcissistic, adornments of more 'primitive' cultures. Davis meanwhile critiques the "tacit assumption" of fashion where "tastes and standards were located essentially within the vast shadow and penumbra of a Eurocentric culture" as no longer

applicable (Davis, 1992:200) whilst Blumer (1969) has launched a direct attack on the narrowness of Simmel's characterisation of fashion, anxiously questioning the contention that fashion is determined by the authority of an élite, arguing instead that it is an act of collective mood, taste and choice set "through a process of free selection from among a large number of competing models" (1969:280). It is with these alternative views and their disruptions of the classical hierarchy of fashion in mind that I now examine the emerging intricacies of fashion, applying this term to a much broader and more diverse range of systems than has traditionally been conceived.

Of particular importance here is the posing of a challenge to the fashion/anti-fashion polarity that has underscored these traditional hierarchical systems and marked out fashion as a privileged and aspirational domain quite detached from more common ways of dressing. Flügel (1930) for example made the distinction between 'modish' and 'fixed' types of dress and this subdivision of clothing into two categories based on alternative models of time - fashion with change and progress, anti-fashion with continuity - still endures today. Yet in spite of the popularity and continued use of this dualism, a dualism that we saw played out between the showiness of fickle couture and the timelessness of classic utility clothing, there is an entire spectrum of far more contradictory and competing engagements with fashion than this vastly oversimplified fashion/anti-fashion scenario. Both Craik (1994) and Braham (1997:145) for example tell us that we now have "multiple fashion systems" in operation where "fashion moves up, down and along from a variety of starting positions and in several directions, rather than a single system in which fashion only moves in one direction, 'trickling down' from the elite to the majority". Furthermore, according to Wilson (1985:5) even the

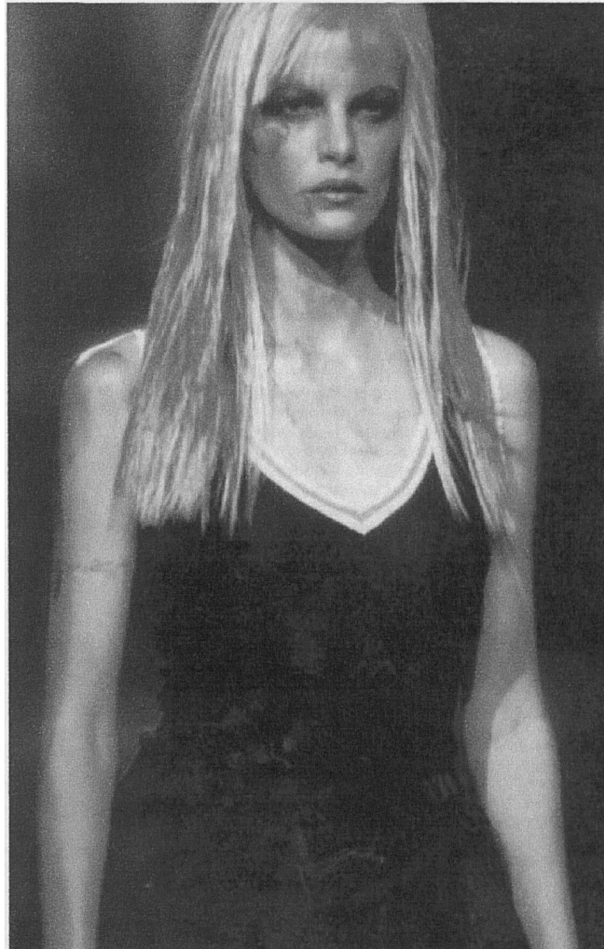
resolutely unfashionable still fulfil a significant and important role in the fashion system, being unable to divorce themselves from fashion entirely, so that,

"even the determinedly *un*fashionable wear clothes that manifestly represent a reaction against what *is* in fashion. To be unfashionable is not to escape the whole discourse, or to get outside its parameters". (Wilson, 1985:5)

To illustrate this point Wilson (1985) cites the example of Harold MacMillan during the 1950s, his trademark and resolutely unstylish shapeless knitted cardigan, an emblem of his unflappability, quickly being adopted by women of the smart set as the fashion 'must-have' of the season - a case of functional, even frumpy, clothing permeating the supposedly 'closed' and exclusive ranks of seasonal fashion. So we see how the banal contrivances of fashion and the picking and mixing, what Calefato (1997:83) terms as the "devouring" of fashion statements, takes place between very different groups and locations. Still further, think of the controversial glamourising of 'heroin chic', a prominent catwalk look during the mid to late 1990s (Arnold, 1999). Here, androgynous models such as those in Antonio Berardi's Autumn/Winter catwalk shows of 1997-8 (figure 19) were used as "signifiers of dark addictions" (Arnold, 1999:280). The dishevelled clothes and deathly models, pale and waif-like, were rejections of conspicuous consumption, challenging conventions of beauty and good taste and instead aestheticising 'deviant' behaviour, drawing inspiration from the junkie and a dark world of addiction and drug abuse. Evans and Thornton (1989:59) suggest that such permutations evident in the likes of heroin chic "obliterate" the rigidity of 'high' and 'low' fashion and the distinctions traditionally made between the designer and the street. Therefore through such radical fusions as Berardi's formal and privileged couture

training with the illegal and sleazy underworld of drug culture - a fusion that Davis (1992:130) has termed as a "dialectical relationship" between seemingly very different

*Figure 19: Heroin Chic. Berardi's 1997-8 collection obliterated the distinction between 'high' and 'low' fashion. The model pictured here has a deathly pallor and bears the grotesque scars of drug addiction.*



cultural worlds - we are able to see these multiple fashion systems in action, systems that, contrary to classical conceptions, do not operate in isolation and are not mutually exclusive.

What is particularly fascinating in these multiple visions are the dialectics that exist between western and non-western fashions. As we have seen, in identifying fashion as



a process of continuous and faddish change, the very idea of fashion has largely been removed from the domain of 'traditional' societies. However Aubrey Cannon (1998), drawing on the unquenchable Native American desire for novel beads and cloths - these being valuable cultural symbols of personality and skill - argues that, contrary to conventional schema, the same processes of rapid change and fickleness are indeed observable in almost all cultures, thereby inferring that fashion is far from being a characteristic only of the West. Cannon extends this argument by calling for more inclusive definitions of fashion, definitions that recognise the "universality of fashion" (1998:23) and that accommodate the cross-cultural application of the term.

Moreover, the fashions evident in these non-western cultures do not circulate in the sole domain of their own 'parent' culture. Instead their influence may be found to percolate through all manner of intricate networks, emerging in what might at first be considered as the most incongruous of settings, quite literally having been 'displaced' and often inscribed with quite significantly different meanings along the way. Wheeler (1999) provides a first-hand account of these cross-cultural processes. Writing about the attire of western student backpackers working their way around Asia she highlights how these students are traffickers, not only of different fashions between countries, but also of meanings and identities. Back 'home' in Europe, writes Wheeler (1999:26) "any one of them [the students] could have walked off the pages of a glossy fashion magazine", yet in the gruelling environment of, say, southern Vietnam their clothes are heavily steered towards function, durability and comfort, these crumpled travellers quite unwittingly being trend-setters in a different time and place. As Wheeler comments, backpackers to Asia take advantage of the exceedingly cheap, meticulously made-to-measure clothing available there, buying entire wardrobes of indigenous hand-loomed silk; Cambodian-

style 'krama' scarves; mother-of-pearl trims; Vietnamese embroidery; Thai 'kung' pants, and brightly coloured sari fabric worn as sarongs (the equivalent designer version in the West costing £600 from cult couturier Dries Van Noten). Returning home, these same custom-made pieces are the pinnacle of the 1999-2000 catwalks (figure 20), with backpackers finding themselves, often unintentionally as,

"people who do not just keep up with fashion trends but effortlessly create them. Forget *Vogue* and the catwalks - those looking to find 'the next big thing' should hit the backpacker trail.... For proof, look no further than the Birkenstock and the Velcro sports sandal. Both were popularised by backpackers but just about every top designer has now created a version.... That Vietnam offers particularly rich sartorial pickings has not gone unnoticed by fashion designers...you only have to look at what Madonna was wearing at the Oscars recently: a Versace version of the Vietnamese *ao dai* or long tunic over trousers".  
(Wheeler, 1999:26)

The mobility of fashion that we see exemplified here in the contents of the student rucksack illustrates how the inspiration for couture chic can 'bubble up' from the most



Figure 20: Backpacker chic from the Dries Van Noten collection spring/summer 1999. Here sari fabric has been wrapped as a sarong to create a 'rich hippy' look that borrows inspiration from the functional clothing of backpackers to the Far East - an example of cultural 'routes' and the complex exchanges that go to form different circuits of style.

humble and geographically distanced of places with exceptionally functional clothing in one realm being translated into the season's ultimate fashion of another. Thus the conceptualisation of fashion should be drawn as a far messier affair than has previously been recognised, one where the idea of complementing and contrasting 'multiple' systems sets the pace for a much more dynamic approach to fashion.

Over the course of this chapter I have argued how there is a need for more dynamic and inclusive approaches to the study and theorisation of the globalisation of fashion. From my discussion of new cultural geography, through debates on the pluralising consumer world, to the evolving vibrancy of new modes of retailing, the study of fashion is acquiring new impetus, one that moves beyond the judgements and superiority of introspective western viewpoints and one that questions the continuing usefulness of classical perspectives on fashion with, for example, their rigid class hierarchies. In mapping out some of the key theoretical developments in the literature on globalisation, identity politics and fashion, this chapter has suggested that 'explaining fashion away' through grand meta-concepts or unwieldy generalisations has failed to capture the messiness and the nuances of the globalisation of fashion. For, as we shall see over the course of my evolving discussion on British fashion in the chapters that follow, the global relations of the fashion industry are far from straightforward. In the next chapter, for example, we see how the geo-political shake-up of Britain has had direct implications for national creative industry and how, in particular, the fashion industry is a potent site over which these emerging struggles and insecurities concerning national identity are being played out. It is through this examination of fashion's formulation of 'banal nationalism' that we might seek a better understanding of the changing face of

Britain and Britishness, as well as the transforming role of the nation in the global order and the complexities of global-local relations.

## CHAPTER THREE

### A State of Disunion: Britishness and British fashion

#### 3.1 Identity Crisis: Locating Britishness

It is now *de rigueur* for the British to be brooding about their national identity (Chancellor, 1999). "Stirred" by the Black Atlantic and "shaken" by the vibrations of Eurostar (Davey 1999:11), the prevailing cultural "soundtrack" questions the very nature of Britishness and its continued "understanding as a national phenomenon". The nation-state at large is said to face an uncertain future. Nowhere is this future more uncertain than in the case of the British nations (recall, for example, the contestations over British national identity that I introduced in chapter one with attempts to re-brand and re-new Britain and Britishness under the banner of 'Cool Britannia'). Weakened and eroded by the combined forces that we have seen mapped out in the preceding two chapters - of economic and cultural globalisation - the fragmentation and uncertainty that accompany these processes has meant that the resulting disposition is one of 'ontological insecurity' (Giddens, 1990). The old order is "withering towards its point-zero" (Billig, 1995:135) and, as I argued over the course of chapter two, is being replaced by a postmodern logic characterised by a mobility of people, a plurality of identities and an interconnectedness *between* places.

In this chapter, I look at how the British fashion industry is wrestling with this insecurity by examining its negotiation of national discourses. Through the specific cases of two 'iconic' British organisations - Mulberry Plc and Paul Smith Ltd - the production and use of British identity in a global fashion setting is viewed at a number of sites within the industry and along its commodity chains. For, in spite of the "putative gravediggers" (McCrone, 1998:173) who insist that the nation no longer has

any resonance in a globalising world, Britishness continues to pervade fashion consciousness, a fragile relationship, that, as I go on to show here, is fraught with difficulties and contradictions. I begin, however, with a discussion of Britishness itself and the various definitions to which this has been applied.

British identity is a notoriously difficult concept to define and despite the best efforts of a "conjurer government" (Davey, 1999:7) eager to unveil and display a definitive national identity in terms of 'Cool Britannia', Britishness remains elusive. Osmond (1988) employs the term 'Anglo-British' to convey the difficulty of capturing what is described as a "mongrel and shifting culture" (Byatt, 1998:16) - Anglo-British referring to the dual-identity operated by England, at once purporting to a national self-awareness in terms of English identity but simultaneously belonging to the multi-national state that is Great Britain. It is this duality, the ambiguity between English and British identity, that is the source of much of the confusion and angst over Anglo-Britishness. For the English, once the dominant partner in a multinational state, now find themselves "divided, uncertain and at odds about their future", (Davey, 1999:6). Davey continues,

"Once they were simply 'the English', with the Home Counties as their core...whose overarching identity, Britishness, concealed the hierarchy, the extent and the heterogeneity of England's evolving empire. The Scots, the Welsh and the Irish may have dual identifications, but for the Anglo-British, Britain serves as another name for the ambitious and self confident England that has existed as a nation since the fourteenth century".  
(Davey, 1999:6)

The UK, or 'Yookay', as Raymond Williams terms it (quoted in Nairn, 1988), is therefore enveloped in obscurity. Defined politically as the United Kingdom of Great

Britain and Northern Ireland, a product of the Act of Union dating back to 1707<sup>6</sup>, it is, as we see here, more commonly abbreviated to either Great Britain, or more bafflingly still, interchangeably referred to as England - a shorthand that does little to facilitate national identification. Mulberry's marketing director bolsters this vagueness over terminology, relating how Englishness has colonised British identity, not just nationally, but internationally, in the consumer imagination, so that,

"people's perceptions of Britishness is really Englishness. Outside, globally, when people think of Britain, they tend to think of England. If you stop your average Japanese consumer and said 'Britain' they would...their perception of Britain is really about England...to all intents and purposes, Britishness is really Englishness, really, in a nutshell".  
(Author's interview)

Therefore, in fashion, just as P. Taylor, (1991) more broadly suggests, geo-political definitions of territory are seldom used accurately, the urge for territorial precision holding little sway over the imagination of consumers geared towards a more "symbolic activation" (Daniels, 1993:5) of the national picture, one that is co-ordinated and often largely defined through cultural iconography or by representations of,

"legends and landscapes', by stories of golden ages, enduring traditions, heroic deeds and dramatic destinies located in ancient or promised home-lands with hallowed sites and scenery."  
(Daniels, 1993:5)

The ambiguous nature of Anglo-British terminology, then, is seen less as a dispute over the physical location of national boundaries and more as a reflection of the "historical

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<sup>6</sup> Historians have taught us, however, that Britain had been germinating for a considerable period before this Act of Union. The formal incorporation of Wales, for example, took place in 1536. In 1603 the first 'British' monarch came to the throne (when James VI of Scotland became James I of England). Yet despite the fact that there was a British monarch from this point onwards in history, it was not until the Act of Union in 1707 that an official British state

and contemporary power relativities within the multi-national state" (Taylor, 1991:147), the shape and edges of the "imagined community" (Anderson, [1983] 1991:6) of the nation being changeable, often vague and characteristic of its state and status as a malleable cultural artefact. As we see here, the boundaries of England, Britain and the UK are frequently muddled and this very evasiveness allows national identity to be usurped by different players in the fashion industry (as we shall see with the cases of Mulberry and Paul Smith) for their own ends, to create Anglo-Britishness in their own image and according to their own agenda. Britishness, then, is about far more than simply residing in the confines of a given area, or of possessing the 'primordial ties' that link us to one nation instead of another. Rather, "the nation" writes Verdery (1993:41) is a "construct, whose meaning is never stable but shifts with the changing balance of social forces" - a mobility of meaning that, when commodified by the fashion industry, "greatly influences our popular notions of Italianess, Frenchness and Britishness" (Davey, 1999:121). These notions in turn are inscribed with all manner of cultural and political codings: as Steele notes, the controversy over skirt lengths in the 1970s was interpreted in an extremely geo-political way, the 'midi' (mid-calf in length), launched in Paris becoming a symbol of French dictatorship, whilst the competing 'mini' skirt (snatched from its creator nation, the England of 1960s designer Mary Quant) was emblematic of American youthfulness, both reflecting and aiding the construction of national values to do with freedom and liberation (Coleridge, 1989; Craik, 1994; Steele, 1997).

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came into being. Only later in 1801 did Ireland enter the Union, the same year that the Union Jack was designed and first used in its modern form.



### **3.2 Off-the-peg Identity: The invention of British tradition**

What, however, of the confusion and ambivalence that surround cultural perceptions of Britishness? Applied to England and Great Britain alike, the "discourse of ambiguity" (Pratt, 1992) over Britishness acts as a valuable resource, drawn upon by influential members of cultural industry to interpret and reproduce versions of the nation and its subjects. This is the "fuzzy frontier" of Britishness (Cohen, 1994:35), a reference to the constantly evolving shape and form of a largely imagined identity in which Scottish, Welsh, English and Irish boundaries are seen commercially as being extremely elastic repositories for the accommodation of different signs and symbols. This design and invention of national identity, legitimised via the fuzziness of its frontiers, has always been circumstantial, tailored to the needs and requirements of a prevailing agenda, "constructed" argues McCrone (1998:30; Smith, A., 1991; Taylor, J., 1994; Wright, 1985) "in the course of social or political action". This invention is particularly obvious in the evolution of 'modern-day' Britishness, itself an exemplary case of the manufacturing of an "off-the-peg identity" (Parris, 1998:22), a product of 'invented tradition' seen to be rooted in the remotest of antiquity, yet actually originating only in the recent past of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (Hobsbawm, 1983; Weiner, 1981). Therefore, whilst nation-builders are concerned with "expressing the flowering into time of the organic essence of a timeless people" and of evoking a sense of naturalised identity, nations are in fact manufactured entities, built around "contested systems of cultural representation" (McClintock, 1995:353). Parris (1998:22) expands on this idea of invented Britishness and in so doing shows how, long before the current project of 'Cool Britannia', the British nation was re-branded at the beginning of the twentieth century, in large part, as an antidote to the changes brought by the Industrial

Revolution, something through which to provide a sense of nostalgia, security and tradition.

"We have always created pomp and ceremony to suit our circumstances.... Nationhood, the traditionalists suppose, runs deep; you can't just dissolve a nation or quickly make a new one. You can. ...Nationhoods are the leylandii of social history, not the oaks. A nation can be sited, planted and tended to a conscious design. Nationhood can grow tall in a couple of generations...all you need are a couple of novels, a popular song, a TV series and somebody else to hate.... Towards the end of the last century and as this one began, the modern age - mobile, demotic, urban, industrial - needed to refocus its sense of nationhood, and something rather splendid was required. A plebeian, royal-mug buying, medal-collecting, spectacle-gawping mass culture wanted its symbol of permanence and triumphalism. A new kind of royalty provided it, and the myth makers and tradition-smiths of public life stepped in. We were, in a sense, putting the royal seal of approval upon ourselves. Monarchy as we understand it today is not much older than the Dimplebys and about as old as the motorcar".  
(Parris, 1998:22)

National identity may be conceived, therefore, as a confection of selective memories, generating traditions and rituals in order to reinforce ideas of permanence and longevity and also supplying the 'plebeian masses' with a collection of codified emblems through which to foster national belonging and a sense of identification. The cultural intermediaries of the fashion industry are involved in a similar process of selection (as I shall discuss in relation to the specific cases of Mulberry and Paul Smith in the second half of this chapter). They are continually delving into the past for convenient emblems to suit their corporate objectives, often using commodified notions of nationness to evoke these same sentiments of tradition, durability and earnest values in their own products. "Certainly patriotic themes provide the value-added selling points for many a product's marketing campaigns" writes Billig (1995:114).

As Parris (1998) has suggested (above), the British monarchy holds a particularly dominant place in this portrayal of the nation, royalty providing the basis for a surrogate

nationalism erected against modernisation and the threat of republican Europe (Aslet, 1997; Withers, 1997). Indeed, much of British identity has been articulated around the crown - recall for instance Vivienne Westwood's powerful and ironic re-presentation of nationhood through her adoption and parodying of royal-conservative identity that I outlined in chapter one (section 1.1) - a predominantly monarchist, Protestant and imperial identification where the nation is viewed through its institutions such as the BBC, the Church of England and the National Gallery (Aslet, 1997; Davey, 1999; Nairn, 1988; Paxman, 1998; Samuel, 1992; Taylor, P., 1991). Yet it is also out of these fixed and stalwart identifications - identifications that have institutionalised, memorialised and stabilised British identity; that have privileged England and Englishness over and above all other member states, and that have suspended it in an imagined, ceremonial and deeply nostalgic past - that the current despair over national identity has subsequently arisen. For however solid and enduring Anglo-Britishness may have been pedalled as in the past, the problems surrounding such fixed and neatly defined constructs are surfacing apace. "If it were simply Old, Deep and Enduring, Englishness, like an oak table", writes Davey, (1999:20) "wouldn't need much more than an occasional polish". However as the political spin-doctors have discovered in their attempts to re-constitute a 'cooler' Britannia befitting a multi-cultural, twenty-first century nation, the task in hand is proving far more problematic than a simple polishing off of established emblems and ideals. It is to these problems over the handling and definition of a national identity as something that is "never complete, always in process" (Hall, S., 1990:222) and as a "narrative" (Bhabha, 1990) that I now turn.

### 3.3 Secessionary Nations: The rise of the 'Confident Celts'

In the face of devolution; of Europe presenting an alternative power focus to Westminster, and of global challenges to the relevance of the nation as an on-going unit of classification, Britain, in its geo-political rendering as a union between Wales, Scotland, England and Northern Ireland, is at the brunt of unprecedented constitutional reform. Indeed Nairn (1981) goes so far as to argue that 'the break-up of Britain' is a political certainty. Added to this is the slow demise of the institutions that I have painted as being such a crucial foundation of the nation, institutions that Scruton (1998:45) suggests should either be forgotten entirely, or if remembered, "remembered with shame.... The Crown has lost its charisma and Parliament its sovereignty;" he writes, "the Union is crumbling, and our law is increasingly imposed on us by foreign bureaucrats." Britain and Britishness are suddenly uncertain entities, their very meaning up for grabs. Once a concept almost so obvious it was barely discussed - representations of 'the British' were steely and tenacious, "like cold baths in midwinter, regimental blazers with brass buttons and opening the bedroom window at night, especially when there is a freezing gale" (Howard, 1999:20) - Britishness has now become the topic of the hour due to the very fact that it has been destabilised, in turn, vexing the very validity of an on-going sense of union and of a, quite literally, 'Great' Britain as the hub of an expansive empire. As a leading article in *The Guardian* elaborates,

"...in Scotland and Wales, the appetite for self-government there, and the deeper sense of identity underpinning it, has prompted people to doubt if we need a Britain at all. If Scots identify themselves as Scots rather than as Brits, what need for a Union with England, Wales and Northern Ireland? Perhaps a new global order is emerging, in which nations simultaneously shrink into small, ancient tribes and join large, supranational blocs. If Wales can run itself, and be in the European Union, why should it bother to be in Britain?"  
(*The Guardian* 1999:21)

A question mark does indeed hang over the operational future of Britain as a political and ruling entity, but what is particularly fascinating is not so much the political withering of a once great nation but rather the cultural impact that this instability has had on the dynamics of its secessionary states and their own senses of identity. As Scotland and Wales are becoming evermore independent, the English - who long ago decided to sacrifice their Englishness to Britishness as a means of marking themselves out as the superior force within the union - are rapidly finding themselves as the weak link in this new order. The implosion of Great Britain has left the English with little idea of who they now are, Britishness having technically been dissolved. Esler (2000:41) expands on the changing dynamics of this relationship, suggesting that the tables have been turned within the union, the most pressing - and unwieldy - question of contemporary times emerging as that of *English* nationalism. He writes,

"England represents 85 per cent of the population of these islands. That means politically England has always been an elephant in bed with three fleas. The grievances of the fleas have now partly been attended to by devolution, while the English elephant has come to feel left out. The result is the creation of a new elephantine political issue, England's own National Question." (Esler, 2000:41)

Thus whilst the Welsh and Scottish have shamelessly been at work promoting their own regional interests, sharpening their "small nationalism's" (Taylor, P., 1991:146), and formulating a coherent and meaningful identity for themselves as counterbalances to the hegemony wielded by the Anglo-British, the English have been left wanting, "with no measure of agreement as to what England is" (Steed, 1986:95). Once the traditional institutions and images of Anglo-Britishness have been eroded, little of the old identity remains through which to maintain an imperial and monarchical<sup>7</sup> national allegiance.

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<sup>7</sup> Note also that sartorially speaking, the British royals often favour a Celtic 'look'. Consider for example the propensity for images in recent years of Prince Charles attired in kilt and full

Even the 'rural idyll', an icon of patriotic sentiment used repeatedly to summon national pride and nostalgia is said by some commentators to be under threat (Aslet, 1997; Matless, 1990, 1998; Paxman, 1998; Samuel & Thompson 1990; Scruton, 1998:45), the Arcadian landscape becoming increasingly urbanised and transformed into,

"a web of interlocking motorways, with faceless housing estates scattered between them. Hedgerows, coverts and copses have been brutally torn up, and only here and there can we glimpse the serene and smiling face of the England that was. The place which the English identify as their home no longer exists." (Scruton, 1998:45)

Anglo-Britishness is increasingly cast therefore as an empty and vacuous shell of "nothingness" (Henderson, 1999:10; Springpoint Report, 1999). Its most fitting symbol, writes Scruton (1998:45) being "that vast shrine to nothingness", the Millennium Dome. What we are seeing here is almost an inversion of the orthodox distribution of national self-assurance and cultural confidence. The English, once the trailblazers in imperial conquest, Britannia ruling the waves and regarded as a global powerhouse, are now suffering at the hands of their own complacency and "national navel-gazing" (Toynbee, 2000: 18). Their sentimental, nostalgic, backward-looking and extremely insular portrayals of a 'golden age' being viewed as 'irrelevant', 'undesirable' and based on an unattractive colonial past (Springpoint Report, 1999), a white elephant that has failed to move forward, to keep abreast of the fragmentary and hybrid times, and to account for the contemporary diversity of influences and cultures in the modern, progressive nation. Meanwhile, their proud Celtic neighbours are emerging as confident nations with a strong sense of identity, eschewing their 'British' label in favour of their, once victimised and subjugated, secessionary identifications. Byatt (1998:16) for example

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Highland regalia and see also Cooke and McLean (2000) on the significance of the Queen Mother's trademark 'tartan sash' in the (albeit implicit) fostering of a Scottish - rather than British - national allegiance.

tells of her "dismal disgust" with the remaining out-of-touch and out-of-date English symbols, of those,

"dismal Tory images of Englishness: mangy lions, waddling bulldogs, heritage (horrible word...), insularity and cosy pomp. I'm not sure about Blair's gawky Cool Britain either...I worry that people simply apologise for the English part of it". (Byatt,1998:16)

When held up for inspection against the romantic nationalisms of Scotland, Wales and Ireland, Englishness is felt to be "unsavoury stuff...something dirty" (Toynbee, 2000: 18), a museum piece with sinister, extremist undercurrents that adds up to an unconvincing, negative and exclusionary image.

However there is an intriguing twist to this seemingly irretrievable English identity and its hopeless destiny, the death knell of Englishness-past signalling only part of what is a much more complex story. Although "that Greater England, symbolised by bowler hats, stiff upper lips and horse whips" (Davey, 1999:7) is in decline, calls for at least *some* sense of English identity to vie against Welsh, Scottish and Irishness are emerging. These calls, however, are for a renewed, rejuvenated and far more contemporary sense of what England and Englishness is - or might be - one that says farewell to "sanitised maypoles, Morris dancing, wassailing, mumming and the like" (Toynbee, 2000: 18) and "hello Damien Hirst, Michael Owen and Mr Bean" (Harlow, 1998: 3). More markedly still, these calls are also exceptionally distinctive in their demographic constitution, making the case for a far more hybrid nationhood where Englishness has different meanings for different groups at different times. For example, a recent Sunday Times study of English teenager's revealed "an unprecedented upsurge in *modern* English nationalism" (Norton, 1997:11, emphasis added), a kind of 'Anglo-fervour' in which

popular symbols of England altered in accordance with different generations - the nation's 13-16 year olds showing intense pride in an England that revolved around Glenn Hoddle's football team, Britpop and fish and chips, whilst the over 50s participating in the same survey identified more with the Queen and emblems of imperial nostalgia, the schoolchildren rating the cultural significance of these as far less important than Coronation Street and EastEnders (Norton, 1997: 11).

What we are seeing here is the incredible diversity of meanings and symbols that are generated under the guise of Englishness, a common term "used by people who think they understand the same thing by it" (Verdery, 1993: 38) but whose resultant range of vignettes are ambiguous, disparate and frequently competing, as Matless (1990:179) points out in his study of definitions of rural England since the 1920s, "these definitions have sometimes been in opposition to one another and are not constant over time". Whilst "flatulent beef-eaters and mossy Kodachromes of Leeds castle" (Harlow, 1998:3) are still sought out and treasured by some, others, cheering on a livelier snapshot of Anglo-Britishness, one that is modern and multicultural featuring "good food and modern thinkers" (Harlow, 1998:3), view these same symbols as boring epitaphs to "lazy nostalgia", a vision of time-warp England, fine for the 1950s and the citizens of 'Middle England' but alien to other socio-cultural groupings. Therefore such is the immensity of competing sentiments and emblems of Anglo-British identity - ranging from Hardy Amies to John Galiano, from Yorkshire pudding to rocket salad (Harlow, 1998:3) - that the idea of there being some "singular, univocal, national essence or identity, old or new, simply waiting to be uncovered" (Davey, 1999:7) is riddled with inadequacies and open to question. As Bauman (1996:18) writes,



"if the modern 'problem of identity' was how to construct an identity and keep it solid and stable, the postmodern 'problem of identity' is primarily how to avoid fixation and keep the options open". (Bauman, 1996:18)

Verdery applies this idea directly to nationalism, arguing that the term no longer makes any sense when the latest focus is "how a single symbol, nation, takes on multiple meanings" (1993:41). What then, with this backlash against the stabilising of identities, is the way forward for Anglo-Britishness, itself an identity with a long past form of univocalism and exclusivity? Rather than the reduction of Britain's growing diversity into merely a fresh set of suffocating and rigid clichés, or conversely the widespread dumping of all signs to Anglo-Britain's past as hopelessly passé, fixed and no longer meaningful, there needs to be instead, I think, a reconciliation between these constructed notions of the national 'ancient' and national 'modern', a reconciliation built around the realisation that these components are not necessarily antithetical nor are they in competition with each other. As Leonard (1997:72), expanding on this idea, suggests,

"Renewing Britain's identity does not mean inventing a completely new image of Britain or doing away with its heritage and tradition. It means regaling excitement around Britain's core values - as a democratic and free society in an interconnected world - and finding a better way of linking pride in the past with confidence in the future." (Leonard, 1997:72)

Rather than viewing the English element of Britishness with embarrassment, as being pompous and superior, or loutish and potentially aggressive with xenophobic tendencies, the cultivation of a far more positive mind-set on Anglo-Britishness requires serious attention.

Indeed the concept of nationalism in general has always been viewed as something of a pariah for the English. Nairn (1988:128), for example, writes that the Anglo-British regard the very notion of nationalism as "inherently foreign", something of which to be extremely wary, an almost exotic notion restricted to what Giddens (1985) terms as outbreaks of 'hot' nationalist passion, characteristic of separatists, guerillas and extremists. Taylor (1991:148) echoes this sentiment, writing that "one of the most curious characteristics of the English" is the insistence that they are not nationalist in their sentiments. Nairn (1981: 293) has termed this as "the myth of the absence of nationalism", an absence that has led to Anglo-Britain being, at the start of the new millennium, a nation unable to articulate itself, empty and lost, a distant entity, irrelevant and far-removed from the everyday lives of its people (Springpoint Report, 1999).

In the following section, I develop this theme of national absenteeism still further, examining how, contrary to much academic and popular writing on the subject, nationalism is not restricted to exotic, extremist or spectacular domains. It is in this exploration of more 'banal' forms of nationalism that I address the role of fashion as a means of reproducing the nation, arguing that fashion is a far more potent tool in the construction of national fields of vision than has previously been imagined.

### **3.4 Banal Nationalism: Reproducing the nation daily**

In order for any notion of national identity to gain a footing it has to first be created and then buttressed. Renan (1990 [1882]) has, now famously, termed this buttressing as the nation's existence as a 'daily plebiscite'. This is the idea that a nation is discursively produced, not only in the florid language of blood myths or in the bunting of official

days of celebration, but that it is reproduced and iterated almost unconsciously within the familiar and routine forms of everyday life - embedded beyond "conscious awareness, like the hum of distant traffic" writes Billig (1995:93), the "deixis of little words makes the world of nations familiar, even homely". This argument, concerning the reinforcement of national identity through 'banal' forms, is also taken up by Anderson (1991) [1983]. He proposes that the modern nation may be seen as an artefact of print capitalism, the emergence of the daily newspaper, and particularly its use of the vernacular, being a significant milestone in the making of an imaginable nation. The development of print technology provided fresh possibilities and new avenues through which to access and propagate a national essence. Therefore, rather than confining the concept of nationalism to intermittent moments of spectacular struggle in peripheral locations - "to small sizes and bright colours" - nationalism may instead be viewed in a far more mundane way, as being an endemic condition, something that Billig, (1995:6) has coined as the idea of "banal nationalism":

"The term banal nationalism is introduced to cover the ideological habits which enable the established nations of the West to be reproduced. It is argued that these habits are not removed from everyday life, as some observers have supposed. Daily, the nation is indicated, or 'flagged' in the lives of its citizenry". (Billig, 1995:6)

This notion of banal nationalism embraces what have largely been the forgotten reminders of nationalism - those discrete mechanisms of nationhood that are embodied in the daily habits of social life. Borneman (1992) extends this still further, suggesting that a distinction should be made between 'nationalism' with its associated fervent, and often negative, passion, and 'nationness', a term that is less threatening and better applied to the more banal practices of implicit and sometimes unarticulated daily 'flagging'. Britishness, then, is about an habitualised form of national belonging, one

that is brought home daily on the familiar tides (Billig, 1995) of a national habitus. Yet it is this same familiarity that has also rendered these banal forms of national identification as being unimportant, even petty - 'banal' nationalism all too often mistaken as 'benign', innocuous or inconsequential.

If the nation-state at large is experiencing a period of destabilisation, its attendant nationalisms, far from fading into oblivion, are nonetheless experiencing a period of transition. Therefore a reminder is necessary, whilst their political futures hang precariously, Welsh, Irish, Scottish, English *and* British identities still do continue to be reproduced and commodified in the latent cultural discourses of everyday life and despite a host of challenges, nationness maintains a strong contemporary relevance. Nowhere are these burgeoning contestations over British identity more evident than in the field of creative industry, where nationness, in its most banal of forms, is frequently an emergent narrative in the fetishisation of commodities. Here, "meaningful knowledges" (Cook and Crang, 1996:132) are built around different products in order for them to become "re-enchanted" and valued, not just economically, but as extraordinary and deeply symbolic goods - the inscription of a national identity onto a commodity assuming a value-adding role as well as offering a route to product differentiation and producing a nationalised lifestyle. Hannerz and Löfgren (1994) expand on this commercial use of nationness citing the case of IKEA, a flourishing and expansive furniture company that, whilst being globally ubiquitous, has also remained enduringly Swedish in its corporate identity and lifestyle strategy<sup>8</sup>. The Swedish national way of life, forged through a very conscious and government-led bout of

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<sup>8</sup> Recent IKEA advertising, for example, was directly couched in terms of collective national characteristics. The company's 2000 UK ad campaign (on TV and in the British national press) urged us to 'Stop Being So British' and to reject 'our' long history of poor taste and frumpiness

nation-making during the 1950s and 1960s, identified order and cleanliness as key notions in the production of an inherently modern national aesthetic. Moderation, simplicity, light colours and natural materials were deemed by the State to be signifiers of modern Swedishness and in turn, these values were to form part of a new framework for everyday life and the basis of a national habitus. This brand of living, of the restrained and practical 'Swedish modern', has since gone on to form the basis of IKEA's flourishing furniture empire with an exceptionally successful export profile that spans the whole of Europe and North America. However, what is exported in the clean lines and streamlined dimensions of this nationalised furniture is not just, say, an IKEA '*Sörgården*' table, but rather a fetishised product infused with a whole host of very specific knowledges "wrapped up in a special aura of Swedishness - consumer goods with an air of 'no frills'...IKEA sells Swedishness through its furniture (and furniture through its Swedishness)" (Hannerz and Löfgren 1994:206). Here we see how the commodification of nationness has played a pivotal role in the fortunes of a global commercial enterprise; of how the "international is nationalised" (1994:199), and perhaps more crucially still, how so-called 'banal' mechanisms of national identification - the table, the home furnishings company, a design aesthetic - operate in an almost reciprocal way, not only mobilising versions of nationness (IKEA furniture is sold through its Swedishness) but also being invested with the power to actually shape these identifications (Swedishness is sold through IKEA furniture) - the creative industries themselves being active reproducers of national identity.

These assumptions and their underestimating of the power and authority of the 'everyday' in the reproduction of Britishness are evident when we turn to the field of

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by 'Chucking Out Our Chintz' and embracing an altogether more modern - and more Swedish - sense of style.

fashion. For fashion, although complicit in the reproduction of society, has been overlooked as a mechanism in the construction and deployment of British identity. As Davey (1999) laments, fashion studies have forgotten the nation. Recall, for example, Anderson's (1991:6) [1983] key assertion that the nation may be conceived as "an imagined political community". In this definition Anderson sets out a framework for the academic consideration of the nation, yet what he fails to map out within this framework are the actual ways in which its much-vaunted 'imagining' are carried out and sustained. With the case of fashion in particular, the buttressing of national representations can, as we shall see over the course of my on-going discussion, take on many of these banal forms. From, for example, the discourses found in the glossy fashion magazine, through corporate iconography and editorial rhetoric, to the mythologies surrounding production techniques and their producers, all of these are largely unacknowledged as significant forces or as daily reminders of what and to whom the nation is and belongs.

The connection therefore between nationness, as a sense of identity, and fashion, as a site through which that identity may be crystallised, has yet to have been fully made or articulated. The fashion theorists Barnard (1996) and Craik (1994) reinforce this dislocation. In their explorations of the habitus of fashion, neither make any mention of national identity as playing a part in how we negotiate our own individual and collective senses of being. But as Davey (1999) - citing the case of the Barbour jacket - counter-argues, fashion is an exceptionally effective means of national differentiation and self-signification. The Barbour, in the global imaginings of the 1980s, became infused with a version of Thatcherite Britain - a symbol of a cultural and political élite

with a discernibly British national identity - flagged daily in the sartorial codings of a nationalised item of outerwear.

In the remainder of the chapter, I pursue this commercial - and reciprocal - mediation of national discourses further by introducing the two cases of Mulberry and Paul Smith respectively. As cornerstones of the national fashion industry, both companies, through their reliance on an innate sense of Britishness, are constantly involved in riding the various disruptions and transformations that have beset not just British national identity *per se* but they are also involved in mediating the concurrent problems and inconsistencies that have characterised British fashion in recent years (the state of which I have already mapped out in my introductory chapters). Therefore, faced with the instabilities of political and cultural change, of industrial insecurity and symbolic malcontent, I explore the ways in which these two organisations are positioned as reciprocal mechanisms of banal nationness - mobilising, and indeed shaping, these ambiguous narratives about Britishness *and* the British fashion industry. In the contrasting mythologies and knowledges that surround Mulberry and Paul Smith we see how these two very different fashion organisations are themselves marginal sites and how both their stories are based on a curious set of juxtapositions and ruptures.

These discourses of ambiguity will begin to emerge over the second half of this chapter as I introduce these two companies and discuss their evolution. Beginning with Mulberry Plc, I examine the ways in which this company has gone about constructing a particularly hidebound version of Anglo-Britishness over the course of its twenty-nine year corporate history. I then turn to Paul Smith Ltd, whose ironic portrayal of British sartorial identity has played a crucial role in catapulting the company to global success.

However, before embarking on this exploration of my two case studies I first give a brief discussion and critique of some of the ways I went about collecting and analysing the 'raw' data derived both from, and around, these two case studies (see figure 21).

Figure 21: Methodology Box  
*Mucking About in The Field*

**Mucking About In The Field - wherever that might be...**

"Postmodern analysis of texts seeks to make explicit the implicit social production of knowledge"  
(Aitken, 1997: 211).

Here I flag up some further politics about the actual processes involved in collecting, and then in representing, my data. For I have found that the processes involved in data collection and data presentation cannot easily be separated out into two discrete phases - my fieldwork did not suddenly end (just as it did not suddenly begin) at some set time, date and place and, equally, my analytical 'phase' of research did not neatly follow on in strict succession after I had returned from being out in the field. My experiences of going out into the field and of collecting data were far fuzzier than this. Moreover, this fuzzy experience begs the questions, just when, where and what was my field? For it was not as if I consciously descended from my ivory tower, pulled on my welly boots, dusted down my clipboard and 'went out there'. Rather, many of the texts that I have drawn upon, used and represented here over the course of my thesis were collected, sought out and stumbled across when, as Clark (1989: 144) terms it, I was "mucking about" and when I was not consciously wearing my 'academic research hat'. My data collection was, therefore, far from being an orderly and directed process. Alongside the formally recognised components of my methodology (the interviews, participant observation and archive work), was an equally valuable, but less structured methodological technique, where, as Lofland and Lofland (1995: 71) describe, I became rather like a "human vacuum cleaner", absorbing anything I came across that might remotely prove useful or relevant to my research.

A substantial amount of my fieldwork, then, was carried out by quite unconventional means - or at least not really in the ways described by some of the rather prescriptive methodology manuals that I had read on how to research. My strategy was to collect 'data' at every available opportunity. For example, when shopping I would gather brochures and publicity images; I would jot down notes from certain TV shows; I would tear out articles from fashion glossies.

Yet do these seemingly random and rather unscientific approaches to data collection and fieldwork constitute 'real' research? And, once gathered, what does one actually *do* with all of this fuzzy data anyway?

Nast (1994) notes that the field does not need to be thought of as a place or even a people but rather it can be read as a political artefact - or as text. As Cosgrove (1989), now famously, asserts "geography is everywhere" and contemporary culture is dominated by representations and images and is constructed through texts - with Barthes (1972) citing the case of the fashion system as an exemplar of text and its cultural practices of signification.

As I went about gathering these fashion texts - the press cuttings, the photographs, the carrier bags and video tapes that I hoarded - I was not only 'doing' my data collection but at the same time I was also (albeit almost unconsciously) making the initial moves in analysing these texts as well. My point here, again, is that the collection of texts and the analysis (perhaps 'interpretation' is a more suitable word) of those texts is not, unlike many methodology books would have us believe, mutually exclusive. The decision, for example, to photocopy a certain advertisement, is in itself constitutive of the process of textual analysis - the selection and then the re-contextualisation of that particular ad into a different time and place all making for new readings, further rewritings and different ways of seeing.

How, then, to go about the problematic task of using and therefore (re)presenting different texts here in my academic research? With a large reservoir of images, postcards, ads, and editorial at my disposal, it has been difficult to select some texts for inclusion over and above others. My choosing of certain images for interpretation and certain texts for discussion is all part and



parcel of mediating a frame through which to view the fashion world. Equally the texts that have been left on the cutting room floor and omitted from my thesis also - through their very omission - orientate the way that I have represented this world and the way in which the reader may view it.

However, against all these caveats and 'crises of representation', I *have* had to 'make my marks' on the blank page; to go through the motions of 'textual analysis', and to write about fashion and the fashion industry (and my understandings of them). To this end, I have tried to look at the texts included here in terms of their social production rather than their 'truth' - to offer an interpretation of these texts in terms of how they are written and read, who writes them and who reads them, for what purposes and with what outcomes (and so on). The issue has been less about trying to 'get behind' these texts and to assess their accuracy, authenticity or 'realness'. Instead, I have viewed them as communicative, and as productive, of social meanings (particularly of class, gender, nationness and identity), looking at their usage and how they are being used. In short, through my technique of textual analysis I have explored not so much '*what* the text is', but more '*why* the text is'.

### **3.5 Introducing Mulberry**

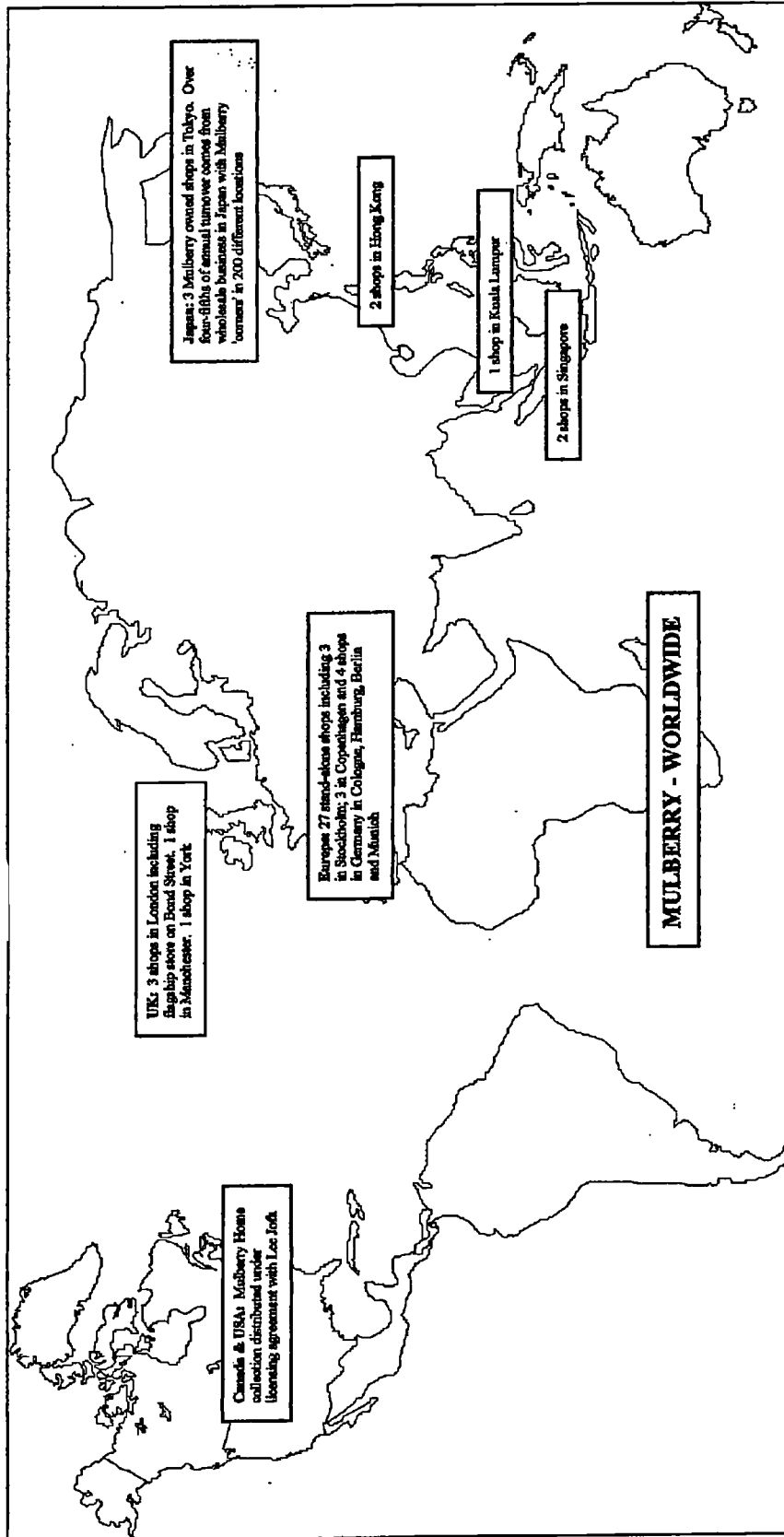
#### **i Facts and figures**

Mulberry, "perceived as the embodiment of upbeat English style" (Mulberry Home 1991:4), was established in 1971 in the small Somerset village of Chilcompton, England, by the current Managing Director, Designer-in-Chief and 'face of Mulberry', Roger Saul. As an aspirational lifestyle brand offering "a quality of life that fuses tradition with modernity, richly woven as a fine tapestry" (Mulberry Life, Autumn/Winter 1990-91:14), Mulberry is most known for its leather accessories - particularly handbags, belts and luggage - and ready-to-wear men's and women's clothing. The Mulberry brand is favoured among high-income professionals (for example, Mulberry charge £35 for a washbag and up to £3,245 for a cruiser trunk) notably in the 30-44 years of age bracket. According to the results of an extensive consumer research survey commissioned by the company in 1998, Mulberry's brand image is synonymous with four key characteristics: 'quality'; 'craftsmanship'; 'timelessness', and 'Englishness' (The Added Value Company, Report Document, 1998). This research also suggested that Mulberry's main competitors are Gucci, Polo Ralph Lauren and Armani, themselves 'designer-oriented', lifestyle brands targeted at upper

middle-class professionals. In 1991 the 'Mulberry Home' collection, an annually produced interiors range, was launched, coinciding with the opening of 'Charlton House', Mulberry's very own hotel in the heart of the Somerset countryside and inspired as a "living showcase" (Mulberry website) through which to exhibit, and indeed, to act out the Mulberry lifestyle in a carefully designed setting.

The company produces a magazine-cum-advertising brochure - 'Mulberry Life' - during the Autumn/Winter season and has also hosted numerous sporting events that feature as main dates on the organisation's promotional calendar, the Mulberry Historic Grand Prix Series, the Mulberry Point to Point, and the Mulberry Classic Pro-Celebrity Tennis Tournament (see figure 41 for an ethnographic account of the class-related discourses in action at this event) being recent examples. In 1996, during its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary year, 'The Collection by Roger Saul', a signature line of special occasion and evening wear designed exclusively by Saul was introduced to the Mulberry fold, a collection said to push "the style boundaries further than we've gone before, while remaining forever Mulberry" (Mulberry Life, 1996:3). As far as retailing is concerned, there are five Mulberry stand-alone shops in the UK, three in London (the flagship store is located on Bond Street), one in Manchester and one in York. Mulberry 'corners' (shops within shops) are to be found in 22 different countries worldwide from Helsinki to Hong Kong, from Stockholm to Singapore, and further to these either Mulberry-owned or franchised shops is a vast wholesale empire numbering to date 536 Ready-to-Wear and Accessories outlets as well as 800 wholesale Home collection accounts (see figure 22).

Figure22: The location of Mulberry retail outlets worldwide.



The humble beginnings of the Mulberry company are well documented with Roger investing a £500 birthday gift into developing an enterprise that had already seen him - as a one-man outfit - designing and manufacturing snakeskin chokers and leather wristbands, fashion 'must-haves' among the early seventies London in-crowd, at his parents' forge in the West Country. Roger takes up his story, recounting how,

"all the things I made on my kitchen table. So I was buying the leather and cutting it up and I had a sewing machine. I did it all, with advice from my father...initially I would cut and father would often help me cut and make the belts. So, I'd design a range, I'd go out and sell it and then from my London base come back [to Somerset] and make it and then deliver it, and my mother would do the invoices. So it was a very, very simple thing. We gradually had one part-time person and then one full-time and on it went".

(Authors interview)

From these modest days during the early 1970s and alongside the Biba pastels and maxi skirts that were the fashion staples of the decade, Roger Saul's handmade leather belts and handbags were exceptional in terms of their quality and attention to design detail. As a result, the company flourished and in 1979 Mulberry received a 'Queen's Award for Industry' in recognition of its export success. By 1982, having added women's ready-to-wear and some menswear to its repertoire, Mulberry launched its first retail ventures in London and Place des Victoires, Paris - the final stepping stones to international recognition and a truly global presence. In 1988, Mulberry, by then the largest manufacturer of designer quality accessories in Britain and exporting a staggering 80% of its production, notched up an annual turnover of £6.8 million and added substantially to the ever-expanding range of "instant classics" in their product portfolio (Mulberry Life, 1996:5). Yet Mulberry's pioneering spirit of the 1970s, of Roger Saul as the hardworking entrepreneur with a creative vision and ambitious business acumen, coupled with Mulberry's overwhelming export success during the



*Figure 23: Mulberry promotional image. This image is 'typical' of Mulberry's 'heady nostalgia'. Evoking a sense of the roaring twenties through heavily stylised graphics (featuring vintage car and spectators in vintage dress), the company is keen to capture a sense of fading grandeur - although more recently this has led to Mulberry being labelled as one of Britain's "dowdiest retailers" (Abrahams, 1998: 52).*

prosperous eighties, has been short lived in recent years. In bringing the story up-to-date we see that the accomplishments and highly effective operational formulae that saw Mulberry develop into a multi-million pound global concern, optimistically "proclaiming itself as a leading international designer brand" and brave enough to posit itself as a challenge to the marketing muscle of the luxury leather goods giant Louis Vuitton (*The Times*, 1999:31), has fallen foul to the pressures of a challenging economic climate and to changing consumer tastes. Attracting media headlines such as "Threadbare Mulberry" (Halstead, 1997:9) and "Red is this year's look for Mulberry" (Daily Mail, 1998:30), the company has found itself suffering not only from financial losses but also from difficulties over its flagging corporate imagery and from being labelled as one of several of the "dowdiest retailers" (Abrahams, 1998:52) - the regular

Mulberry diet of heady nostalgia, of campaign chairs and fob watches, vintage cars and aristocratic pretensions (figure 23) being met with increasing dissatisfaction from many consumers and also, more tellingly still, from several key members inside of Mulberry itself.

## **ii Trouble at the top**

As a prelude to these murmurs of unrest, the company was forced to float its shares at a price of 153p in May 1996 but despite its best efforts Mulberry's share of the market still continued to tumble and few tangible economic gains were made. In April 1999 shares in Mulberry were valued at just 26½p with losses at the end of the tax year numbering well over a million pounds, the full plight of the company being publically acknowledged in a letter sent by Roger Saul to Tony Blair and published in the Sunday Times (quoted in Smith, D., 1998:15). The letter reads,

"I write to you as the head of a British success story that is having its lifeblood squeezed out by the strength of sterling.... We [Mulberry] have survived two world recessions, seen every sort of economic and political change, but never have we been faced with such a devastating long-term period of crisis as the current one caused by the strength of sterling."  
(quoted in Smith, D., 1998:15)

Whilst the strength of the pound and the instability of the Asian economy - Mulberry's largest market - are held up as causal factors in what Roger Saul describes as "one of the most challenging periods in our [Mulberry's] history" (Daily Mail, 1998:30), the role of Mulberry's own problematic corporate identity in this decline has been underplayed. Whilst external factors such as high interest rates and poor government-led investment are undeniable threats to Mulberry's smooth trading, there is, I feel, an internal turbulence within the company that contributes an equally active, yet perhaps less

acknowledged, factor in its current vulnerability. This vulnerability has manifested itself in very real terms, with: the redundancies both of workers at its Somerset manufacturing base and also of some administrative employees; the closure of Mulberry's Somerton handbag factory; the streamlining of its overseas portfolio; the minimising of stock and the jettison of some products from manufacture entirely; the sale of its London King's Road retail unit; the outsourcing of evermore manufacturing to continental Europe, as well as, the full-scale restructuring of the company's directors who have also taken a large pay cut in a bid, says Roger Saul, "to lead from the front" (quoted in Cowe 1998:2).

This catalogue of measures to cut overheads and to resuscitate the company makes sombre reading and the substantial shake up that Mulberry has experienced in recent times has resulted in confusion and instability, a loss of direction, and a feeling of restlessness pervading the organisation at large. (See figure 24 for an account of how Mulberry's instability had a direct impact on, and very real implications for, my own research within the company). Thus, we find Mulberry in something of a transitory period, of an organisation increasingly characterised by a growing 'culture of contemplation' where the need to look hard at exactly what Mulberry is, and stands for, is slowly being recognised but where any easy answers to the questions over its identity and its future direction are equally slow in emerging.

*Figure 24: Methodology Box  
Getting In and Getting On - Issues of access*

**Getting In and Getting On**

"Somehow you have to get in there, and although we often, in writing up our results, talk blandly of our samples or our case studies, letting the reader assume that the particular industry,

location, site, and respondents were optimal or ideal...we all know that the 'reality'...is a lot messier" (McDowell, 1998: 2135).

McDowell (above) makes a pertinent point in her comments on the messiness of gaining access to, and of researching, elite groups. My own fieldwork was dogged by ill fortune and as my access to different companies was denied and was retracted, and as I encountered what seemed to be increasing numbers of closed doors, I began to wonder if I was ever going to be able to do any proper research at all.

I had initially intended to adopt a nested hierarchical sampling method, selecting a sample of fashion companies for more detailed ethnographic research based on the results of a larger primary survey of the industry. However, 'in reality' this intended methodological strategy proved difficult to carry out because of several issues over my own (in)ability to gain - and to maintain - access to the fashion world and the powerful élites that inhabited it. Having scant knowledge of the industry I was researching and, initially at least, having no allies or gatekeepers who could assist in my access negotiations, it proved extremely difficult to persuade companies to open their doors to me. Therefore I was forced to rely on luck and chance in getting my foot in the door - not a strategy commonly recognised in methodological literature on social research.

On reflection, these struggles over negotiating access throw up an interesting discourse on the industry in their own right. For as I have already partly discussed in figure 10, the ethos of the fashion organisation is not research-oriented and its frenetic nature means that little time can be set aside for research and, indeed, for researchers. Certainly my research student identity seemed to have little value - little cultural currency - in most of my negotiations. Some companies, for example, upon hearing the 'student' word, were not prepared to offer anything more than a standard information pack detailing basic corporate facts and figures. Other companies however, upon receipt of my basic introductory letter and follow-up telephone call, did agree to an initial interview with a company representative, to later only withdraw their co-operation on the grounds of time and resource constraints.

Therefore, it was only after several false-starts that I made contact with the companies that were to become ultimately my two case-studies: Paul Smith and Mulberry. By this time, I had certainly become more proficient in setting out my aims and objectives to an industrial audience and, having learnt from cumulative experience that I should encroach on the company as least as possible, I had also streamlined my research requirements - only asking the bare minimum from these two companies. It is impossible to know the extent to which the lessons learned from my initial setbacks and rejections actually helped in the presentation of my research to Mulberry and Paul Smith - but I do believe the rather vexed period I spent fruitlessly trying to negotiate access with other companies did make a difference in the approach I took with these two companies. For these false-starts at least supplied an intensive learning curve and meant that by the time I approached Mulberry and Paul Smith, I had certainly polished my telephone manner and was more knowledgeable in, for example, the terms and language specific to the fashion industry, thereby sounding slightly more pulled together, more professional and more efficient.

As well as my increasingly confident demeanour, luck also played a part in my negotiations with Mulberry in particular. It so happened that the marketing director (with whom I made my first contact with the company) was more tuned into my research requirements than others I had spoken to, being quick to point out that her partner, a university lecturer, had been through the same PhD process as myself. As a result, at least in part, of her personal experience - her positionality - with regard to PhD research, then, the marketing director proved to be an important ally in the company and was keen to offer assistance, giving me access to the resources of the marketing department without hesitation and also negotiating access to other areas of the company on my behalf.

Access to Mulberry was also considerably aided by the fact that I had refined what Lofland and Lofland (1995) term as my 'trade-offs'. Having been asked by several organisations prior to my negotiations with Mulberry exactly 'what do we [the company] get in return?' I continually flagged up my eagerness to participate in the open exchange of ideas and information. I offered to produce a report on my research findings and/or a related pertinent area (although Mulberry did not take up my offer). I also offered "mundane assistance" (Lofland and Lofland, 1995: 59) in exchange for access to interviewees and archives. It was in this bartering of my labour for access to Mulberry's resources, that my methodology acquired a whole new dimension. For my period as an (unpaid) Mulberry employee meant that I was able to conduct



participant observation within the company's press office and to learn about doing business first hand - something that had not been part of my original methodology but that, in the end, proved to be a rich source on the intricacies of doing fashion business (see figure 41).

Having gained access to Mulberry, another interesting discourse on what Hughes and Cormode (1998: 2100) suggest is "the often unpredictable journey of elite research" arises in the problems I encountered in *maintaining* that access. I had begun to conduct some of my archival fieldwork at Mulberry when the marketing director - my gatekeeper - left the company. With the majority of my fieldwork still to conduct (including interviews and some participant-observant), my (rather garbled) details were passed on to the human resources director. Knowing little about who I was, or what I wanted, the HR director (who also happened to be the wife of Roger Saul, chairperson and founder of Mulberry) was extremely anxious about my presence in the company.

As I outlined in section 3.5.ii, at the same time as I was researching Mulberry, the company was experiencing one of the toughest trading periods in its history, with a nosedive in popularity combining with financial losses to place a question mark over the company's future and even its continuing existence. As a result, the HR director had grave suspicions over my identity and over my motives for researching the company, these suspicions being fuelled, in large part, by the wider instabilities going on inside Mulberry at the time. As Cook (1997: 137) comments, the researcher studying powerful élites also poses a potential threat to those élites "through having the power to open out these people's lives for ridicule and ruination by others". Thus, fearing that I may be some sort of covert mole - and potentially having access to commercially sensitive information - I received a telephone call from the HR director informing me that she was suspending my access to the company until we could meet in person to review my state and situation with the company.

Following a long meeting in which I had to justify and explain my interest with Mulberry, I was obliged to go through the entire access procedure again, re-submitting all of my written research requirements for perusal and sanctioning by the HR department. It was only then, after a very anxious period of re-negotiation, that the HR director re-instated some of my access to the company - the number of interviewees and extent of archive time being considerably reduced due to the strain on employees from the wider prevailing corporate crisis.

This wider crisis shows how my own programme of research with Mulberry came to be dictated by prevailing circumstances within the company over which I had very little control. Linked to this is a further point about power and how, as a researcher keen to access this elite group, I was forced to surrender some of my requirements in order to ensure continuing access to, and co-operation with, at least some of my requests. The changing dynamics of my relationship with Mulberry that I have discussed here - the fluctuating relations and fate that I experienced over the course of my research - still further bears out the complexities of (gaining access to and) conducting ethnographic research. For as Hughes and Cormode (1998) argue, the social relations woven between the researcher and the researched (particularly as far as elite groups are concerned) are not fixed or static, the balance of power being context-specific, in this particular case, the relations of power shifting with the changing fortunes of the company at large.

Alongside this contemplative mood, with its progressive urge towards change and renewal, lies a simultaneous determination to remain faithful to traditional company values - at the very height of its economic plight, for example, Mulberry continued to guard fiercely its standing as a luxury, and therefore, elite brand by refusing to discount any of its goods for fear of damaging its upmarket image - the fostering, above all else, of a sense of uncompromising 'Mulberryness' being of paramount importance to the

company even in the gravest of climates. As the company's ready-to-wear design director points out,

"Mulberry has to remain true to itself, so we can't suddenly go pink, just because everybody else goes pink. We can't suddenly go oriental just because everyone else goes oriental...as far as I'm concerned, I do think I have to make sure anything we do in those [ready-to-wear and Roger Saul] lines is true to Mulberry, it doesn't mean it has to be a tweed jacket and jodhpur though, it just has to be true to what is special about Mulberry, unique about Mulberry and isn't totally unexpected and not associated with Mulberry in any way." (Author's interview)

The dilemma for Mulberry, then, lies within its negotiation of a corporate identity that treads the line between progressiveness and nostalgia, between change and continuity, in holding on to those ideals that have been influential over the company's 29 year history, whilst simultaneously maintaining a contemporary edge. More importantly still, this innate sense of Mulberryness, of something that is deep rooted and worth nurturing - of remaining true to the luxurious company values despite the pressures of economic hardship - indicates I think, that the Mulberry organisation is about far more than mere profit margins and the need to 'do good business'.

Rather, there seems to be an underlying cultural imperative that goes beyond hard nosed economics, to do with a Mulberry way-of-life, a Mulberry style "a mood, an evocation, an attitude" (Mulberry Home, 1991:3). Roger expands on this idea, telling how "we were selling a dream, not just a product" (author's interview), how Mulberry is not just a business but a vehicle through which to sell his own intensely personal style message revolving around notions of fun, eccentricity, enduring quality and memories of a childhood spent in rural England. Roger expands on the company philosophy, telling how Mulberry is about savouring,

"the rich charms of old England, its quirky rural pastimes and honest values. With contemporary verve and what I hope is now recognisable as our characteristic humour, we take pleasure in reviving individual styles and in honouring ancient traditions of craftsmanship whilst constantly introducing the most exciting elements of current design and fashion. It is a romantic but robust lifestyle that is lively and intensely fun-loving".  
(Mulberry Life, 1990/1991:2)

Such is the tenacity surrounding Mulberry's philosophy of quirkiness, individuality and tradition, that profits are often seen as secondary to the company's insistence that it must remain 'true' to itself. Mulberry is defiant in refusing to 'sell out' to the minimalism and monochromes that have seen the likes of Italian trailblazers Gucci and Prada becoming the epitome of fin-de-siècle chic, themselves buoyant and flourishing, the leaders of upmarket style. As the Mulberry marketing director explains,

"an interesting thing with Mulberry is that fashion has gone quite minimal, so black, you know, you think of the last five years with Gucci and Prada. Very black and very minimal, very classic. Mulberry tends to be about richness, richness of materials, richness of colours, erm, so the couple of questions with Mulberry is, do you go after fashion?...Or, do you actually say, well look, while fashion is minimal and black, we're just going to accept that that's not us and what we're going to do is almost stay where we are and almost wait for fashion to come back".  
(Author's interview)

What we are seeing here is an approach to business similar to the one described by Cook (1994:236) in his study of the marketing of exotic fruit in the UK, an approach in which "profits are not the sole determinant" nor the only measure of a products success. Indeed as far as Mulberry is concerned immense importance is placed on the symbolic meanings that are very carefully crafted around its commodities, waiving mass appeal and a 'quick buck' in favour of brand distinction and cultural cachet. For Mulberry the fast acquisition of monetary wealth is something of a crass concept, of racketeering and a gaucheness that goes against its gracious and refined corporate values to do with elegant Anglo-British living and good breeding.



*Figure 25: Mulberry's Bohemian Aristocrat collection. This beautifully photographed collection gives an example of the Mulberry way-of-life: elegant, sumptuous and stylish.*

### **iii Huntin', shootin' and fishin'**

Nowhere is this Mulberry mindset more evident than in the 'lifestyle' pages of its 1980s advertising brochures and latterly in the Mulberry Life magazines of the nineties - all beautifully produced texts replete with scenes identifying the quintessential Mulberry way-of-life and with editorial rhetoric detailing how to achieve it (figure 25). But what is particularly fascinating with this promotional material is that despite its weighty marketing spend, photography by the likes of David Bailey, and an international - and exceptionally discerning - target audience, the overall feeling in these texts is one of parochial parish magazine, of whimsical stories and cosy interviews, "a whiff of

heather, a flash of tartan, suggestions of light rain"<sup>9</sup> (Mulberry brochure, 1987/1988:1), Mulberryness is evoked through rustic references and a nostalgia for (Anglo-) Britain-past. There are, 'Mulberry guides to wrinkle-free packing'; an article on the 'fascinating folklore of shoes'; a review of the Mulberry midsummer ball "where revellers continued to dance into the small hours" (Mulberry Life, Autumn/Winter 1997-98:3), and page upon page of memories recalling "the halcyon days of luxury travel" (Mulberry Life, Autumn/Winter 1996:32) embellished with evocative visuals of Mulberry packing cases and suit carriers, trunks and leather clippers.

One of the most pervasive discourses in this promotional material is that of 'huntin', shootin' and fishin' and the attendant 'glamour of backwardness' (Nairn, 1981) that is wrapped up within Mulberry's nostalgic narration of a glorious by-gone age. Mulberry has made its name producing and selling this idyllic lifestyle, drawing inspiration from country pursuits during even its earliest of days as a sapling enterprise. Roger tells of how he came across his inspiration for what was to grow into the very hallmark of true Mulberry style, he says,

"Well about '75, '76, I designed a collection based around English huntin', shootin', fishin', very simply because I found myself going around game fairs round the country, the Bath and West and those sorts of shows and just looked at the quality of saddlery and harnesses and things and it was staggeringly good...I'd always got a lot of inspiration in looking at things like that, the detailing and the sheer no expense spared in producing these wonderfully peacock...erm...so that became the focus...and that was the first time Mulberry was known as a look". (Author's interview)

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<sup>9</sup> It is in this extract taken from a Mulberry brochure that we find an example of the 'fuzziness' of Britishness that I referred to in section 3.2. The shape and form of British, and Anglo-British, identity are constantly shifting to suit the needs of various cultural intermediaries. Here, for example, we see how Mulberry employs icons of Scottish identity - heather and tartan - to evoke ideas of nostalgia, rusticity and parochiality. Equally, however, at other points in its corporate identity, the company refers explicitly to Englishness and also to Britishness - thus highlighting the confusions and ambivalences surrounding national terminology. This example also illustrates the empowered position that the cultural intermediaries of the Mulberry organisation assume for themselves in this ability to move between these terms with seemingly little concern for the wider socio-political ramifications of this picking and mixing.

References to this original Mulberry look constantly emerge across the entire history of the company and in a vast array of forms: the 'Highwayman' jacket and 'Gamekeeper' trousers from the Mulberry 'All Weather' collection; buckle fastenings and detailed stitching painstakingly developed from time honoured saddlery traditions, or the advertising prose for a watersilk hunting jacket, enthusing to potential customers that

Figure 26: Advertising the huntin', shootin' and fishin' look.

Whether HUNTIN',  
SHOOTIN',  
FISHIN',  
or SHOPPIN':

YOU WON'T BE FREEZIN'.


If you want to come in from the cold, come into the new Mulberry flagship store in Bond Street.

There's 600 square feet devoted solely to The All Weather Collection, making it the largest Mulberry All Weather department in the UK.

For adventurers who are passionate about the outdoors and need to be protected from the worst the weather can throw at them, Mulberry have developed a high performance range of clothing and accessories for both men and women.

But what makes Mulberry outerwear special is the combination of traditional design and contemporary styling with the latest fabric technology.

If you're into huntin', shootin', fishin' or shoppin', just call in.

  
**Mulberry**  
ENGLAND

41-42 NEW BOND STREET, LONDON W1. TELEPHONE: 0171 491 3900.  
OPEN MONDAY TO SATURDAY 10AM-6PM AND THURSDAY 10AM-7PM.

"whether huntin', shootin', fishin' or shoppin': you won't be freezin'" (figure 26) - all of these are clear references to a specific form of Mulberryness, hinting at a rural way-of-

life that is monied, aspirational, quintessentially British and always nostalgic. As Brogan, (1990: no pagination) comments, Mulberry,

"combines traditional natural materials and craftsmanship with a distinctive style which is evocative of a more elegant age. Take the Mulberry picnic basket, handwoven from Sedgemoor willow and fitted with classic blue and white china, silverplated cutlery and chrome flask. This splendid piece of nostalgia is reminiscent of blazers, boaters and lazy summer days on the river.... Just by feasting your eyes on Mulberry's exquisite products, the stresses of modern life appear to slough away".

(Brogan, 1990: no pagination)

In a similar vein, and emphasising the notion of Mulberryness more explicitly still, Gillilan, (1989:25) writes how,

"The tweed and wool clad models in Mulberry's current catalogue seem to spend their time loading expensive leather luggage onto vintage sports cars, watercolouring in farmyards, having a jolly time in puddles in the drizzle and rolling in the hay. According to founder and designer, Roger Saul, it's called Mulberrying or 'spending one's time in the country doing nothing in particular...elegantly'. He describes his clothes as 'having a relaxed confidence that owes something to pre-War Country families: self-assured, but never flashy; always practical and superbly made'".

(Gillilan, 1989:25)

In many ways then, the dominant story that we see surrounding Mulberry is one of a pre-war way-of-life, sedate and parochial, Mulberry is cast as a tonic to the stresses of modernity (recall my discussion in section 2.6 on 'wilful nostalgia' and the unprogressive sense of place engendered by backward-looking images and the search for stable roots in the chaotic modern world). However, whilst the presiding narrative does indeed link Mulberry inextricably to notions of 'huntin', shootin' and fishin' and as being "the epitome of English country style" (*Singapore Business Times*, 1991:16), there are rumblings of discontent from inside the company itself with such an image, this dominant narrative increasingly being regarded as something of a millstone, as

potentially boring and somewhat passé - as Roger Saul himself intimates with regard to the future thrust of his company, "I think that today I'm less sure that English or British is important" (author's interview). This is an intriguing reference to what might be argued is the shifting preference away from the wilful nostalgia of 'roots' towards a more globally extensive vision of place, one where national boundaries are increasingly broken down to emphasise the connections - and routes - between places (again refer back to section 2.6).

#### **iv Protesting too much**

When we scratch beneath the surface of this dominant huntin', shootin' and fishin' trope, then, Mulberry, the apparent by-word for country living with longstanding associations to rural Anglo-Britain, is in fact not as stable and as all-pervading as is at first apparent. Indeed the company, as it enters the new millennium, is struggling to discover and to define exactly what Mulberry is, which associations it should cultivate, and which it should go about severing entirely. Certainly there is some shirking of the "blend of parade ground and grouse moor" (Love, 1986:23) with which Mulberry has become synonymous - the marketing department being particularly vocal in its calls for Mulberry to update its corporate identity and to inculcate a renewed sense of Mulberryness that "is more relevant" to today's marketplace than the old huntin', shootin' and fishin' theme, something over which the company "almost protests too much...you know give it a rest" (author's interview). In many ways, therefore, Mulberry's stalwart images and iconography seem to have turned stale. Mulberry Life, for example, once the highpoint of the marketing year, a lifestyle manual and definitive guide to Mulberryness, has recently been branded as redundant and laid to rest, the marketing director explaining that,



"the thing is that the editorial had had its day. The things like how to pack a suitcase...I think if you're genuinely going to be seen as contemporary and competitive, I don't know, to me it just didn't feel right.... I think what it is, is that it [Mulberry Life] is designed to make the people in the business to feel incredibly proud, and it's a beautiful piece of work but I don't think it sells things.... To a lot of people it is evocative of a certain way of life with certain values. Where you've just got to be careful is those values begin to seem very old fashioned if you either overplay them, you know you can almost seem like a country bumpkin, erm, you're trying to, there is a part of this that will always intrigue someone in Tokyo, there's also a part where people say that might have been great in the 1850s but this is, you know, the year 2000."

(Author's interview)

Here we see how Mulberry is keen to update its image and to move in a contemporary direction, one deemed more suitable and fitting for the turn of the twenty-first century, to broaden its appeal, and even to cast off some of its trappings of élitism. However the company is by no means finding this transition an easy task, and rather than driving towards a more dynamic and focused set of invigorated core values, the company is instead in uproar, the changes and challenges of recent years leaving few people with a coherent sense of what Mulberry or Mulberryness actually now stands for. Roger Saul tells of how there is a certain "intangibility" surrounding Mulberry, whilst most of the directors, when asked to define the Mulberry concept, struggled to do so with any real clarity or confidence. Even the factory workers admitted to a sense of aimlessness, "why can't we get back to huntin', shootin', fishin', that's where we, you know, that's when we knew where we were" (author's interview). Mulberry is suffering from something of an identity crisis; once a company self-assured, confident and in tune with itself, we now find Mulberry in a state of limbo. The marketing director expands on this:

"What I was kind of intrigued by, people very freely talked about Mulberryness and the Mulberry lifestyle and I thought, this is, from a marketing point of view, this is really interesting, they seem to have a very definite idea of what they're trying to do.... What I found quite intriguing was that although people used the word very freely, when I sat

people down and said, 'right, sum up for me what Mulberry is', very few people could actually do that.... What is important is that you have to understand what your brand values are. Only once you know what they are, can you begin then to actually work at updating them.... And I think, my instincts tell me people in the business don't quite know exactly what those things are. They have a vague idea and I reckon at a guess they would likely get there, but they're not one hundred per cent sure".

(Author's interview)

From this, we see how Mulberry is currently a company characterised by uncertainty and vagueness. Indeed we join Mulberry at a time when a fracture has appeared in the organisation, one where the fusion between Mulberry-past and Mulberry-future has yet to have been properly and fully formulated and where, in the interim, the company has suffered. Lost in conflict and battling to reshape its identity whilst simultaneously paying sufficient lip service to the traditions on which it was founded, the overriding story is of a company in trouble, its very form of Anglo-Britishness - which I will explore more fully in the chapters that follow - seeming to be a primary factor in its ensuing demise.

### **3.6 Introducing Paul Smith**

#### **i Facts and figures**

Paul Smith, Britain's most successful and arguably most influential contemporary menswear designer began in 1970 in a small shop in Byard Lane on the edge of Nottingham's Lace Market. Most known for his revolutionary work on the male wardrobe, Paul Smith is "the leading designer who persuaded British men that well-cut cloth was not just for pretty boys" (Macalister, 1995:43). Widely regarded as bringing the phrase 'classics with a twist' into common fashion parlance, the Paul Smith organisation is known for a look that is "in many ways traditional, but at the same time funky" (Jones, 1995b: 74). It is this formula, one which borrows from the familiar, or

traditional, as well as the avant-garde, that gives the company its breadth of appeal, for there is no 'typical' Paul Smith customer instead Paul Smith "is everything to everybody" (Jones, 1995c: 5), the father of the humble boxer short but also the brains behind a bespoke tailoring service, "whether you're a bricklayer or rock star" says Smith "it's not a shop you need a new hairdo and stiff drink to walk into" (quoted in Reid, 1995: 19). Rather his clothes "appeal to different types of people with the same sensibilities. Not people of a certain profession, not people of a certain age group. Just people" (Paul Smith quoted in Jones 1995c:3). This attitude is very much the hallmark of the Paul Smith style (although compare this 'attitude' with figure 27, an account of my own dealings with the Paul Smith organisation). Laidback and friendly, Paul Smith - and his clothes - have nothing to do with "class and wealth and all those boring British

*Figure 27: Methodology Box  
Access - Some Ethical Considerations*

**Access: Some Ethical Considerations**

Just how far could - and should - I go in seeking access to the people and organisations that were central to my research? This question was especially pertinent in relation to gaining access to Paul Smith (both the man and the company). My account here is of the various encounters I had with Paul Smith and how these encounters raise several ethical issues over the process of 'getting in'.

I must admit that I approached Paul Smith Ltd in rather a desperate state. With a string of failed attempts to gain extensive-enough access to several other fashion companies behind me, time seemed to be running out and I was keen to find a company willing to co-operate with, and to allow me to do, my research.

As with other companies, my first method of contact with Paul Smith was to send a letter of introduction to their PR department. I followed up this letter with a telephone call and was told a student pack detailing general facts and figures about the company would be dispatched to me. Any further information I required about the company, the PR department told me, was available from the Paul Smith website and therefore, the company felt that my requests for interviews and archive access were somewhat unnecessary - all the 'data' for a student project was already out there in the public domain and an extensive cyber-archive of recent Paul Smith collections and publicity was logged on-line allowing 24-hour accessibility.

I, of course, heeded Paul Smith's advice and went away to explore the company's website and to digest the information they posted to me. The mucking about that I described in figure 21, also became a valuable and important research technique and I accumulated a vast quantity of information on Paul Smith and the Paul Smith company through many hours spent conducting CD-rom searches, internet searches, searching out video clips and TV interviews with Paul Smith, visiting Paul Smith shops and getting my hands on everything and anything to do with the man and his company that was available in the public domain.

Despite all this Paul Smith stuff that I hunted out, I was still very aware - and concerned - that much of it said the same thing and that much of it was of a very similar genre: I had a lot of

publicity rhetoric, a lot of PR...but not much else. In short, I had yet to fully triangulate my methodology.

I therefore went back to Paul Smith Ltd and explained my dilemma, eventually setting up a meeting at the Covent Garden offices between myself and the Paul Smith commercial co-ordinator to discuss my research and research requirements in more detail. The outcome of this meeting seemed entirely positive, with the commercial co-ordinator agreeing to act as my gatekeeper and to arrange several interviews and access to the press office archives on my behalf.

As several weeks and then months passed, however, the assurances of my gatekeeper went unfulfilled and access was not forthcoming. It was during this period of "doubt and frustration" (Cook, 1997: 132) that I was faced with several ethical dilemmas. For just when did 'being persistent' with my gatekeeper actually become pestering? Just when did enquiring of my gatekeeper's progress with my research agenda cross the line into nagging? Just how demanding of my gatekeeper could I be? In the interest of good field relations, I felt that there was only so much 'chasing up' of my gatekeeper I could do. I was, after all, reliant on their good nature, on them doing me a favour and was placed, ultimately, low down on their list of priorities.

Eventually, I had to cut my losses. Realising that I was probably not going to get any further access to Paul Smith from the company itself, I had to figure out how to work around this dilemma. Negotiating access (and guaranteeing access) to yet another company was, by this point in my research calendar, out of the question. Therefore, I decided my only option was 'to go with' Paul Smith and to see if there were any alternative routes towards triangulation open to me.

I managed to track down the names of Paul Smith's biographer and Paul Smith's exhibition co-ordinator (both of whom obviously had close contacts with the company but were not Paul Smith employees) and asked if they were available for interview. Again, ethics played an important part in these requests since, through their agreement to talk to me about the company, I was particularly anxious not to compromise their own relations with Paul Smith. I felt I owed these potential interviewees an honest explanation of my encounter with the Paul Smith organisation and immediately pointed out that I had been somewhat unsuccessful in gaining full access to the company. In getting what was a rather vexed relationship between Paul Smith and myself immediately out into the open, I felt that my new contacts could assess my request for help without any element of subterfuge.

This approach yielded some rich results, with both subjects agreeing to be interviewed. During the interview itself, the dialogue did not, as far as I was aware, appear strained, and both interviewees were very responsive in their answers. Neither seemed 'cagey' nor to show any signs of anxiety about my negative form with Paul Smith. Indeed both showed sympathy towards my problems over access, with my revelations about these problems actually seeming to work in my favour since these two new contacts were especially keen to offer assistance in light of my previous disappointments. My decision to be as open and honest as possible with my interviewees therefore proved to have its advantages: my poor field relations with Paul Smith - and my recounting of these poor relations - opening up fresh avenues of access to people sympathetic, and keen to co-operate, with my research.

things...in fact they've always tried to subvert any of those connotations" (Jones, 1995c:3). Paul Smith may be cast as something of an anarchist, keen to disrupt the conventions and codes that rule the fashion industry. To this end, he employs a subtle blend of humour and irony with which to get his, often quite controversial, messages across. For example, all of Smith's graphics - ticketing, catalogues, invitations and promotional material - are produced by the independent design duo and Central Saint

Martin's graduates 'Aboud Sodano', their repertoire catering for a spectrum of tastes from "boom-boom jokes...[to] more sophisticated humour" (Sodano quoted in Rombough 1997:40) and such is the significance of their work that, over the past eight years, Paul Smith's now infamous Christmas catalogues have become collector's items, much sought after by fans not only of Smith but also by dealers in graphic art and followers of contemporary design.

Despite this prestigious designer status, Paul Smith is keen to champion himself, above all else, as a retailer - as selling good clothes, galvanising the public's interest in those clothes and maximising the potential of his company. When asked how big the company can grow he says, "I don't think we have scratched the surface yet" (quoted in Macalister, 1995: 43). Certainly Smith is very ambitious and the ever-expanding and global status of his company is testimony to Smith's own vision, as a man with no formal design training but with "a great feel for clothes" (*Money Programme*, 1995).

The Paul Smith portfolio is constantly being added to and alongside the original Paul Smith menswear now lies: the R. Newbold range of retrowear inspired by the factory of the same name and bought by Paul in 1991; Paul Smith Women; PS by Paul Smith, a diffusion line of casual wear, as well as Paul Smith for Children; Paul Smith Jeans; Paul Smith Underwear, Spectacles, Bag and Watch.

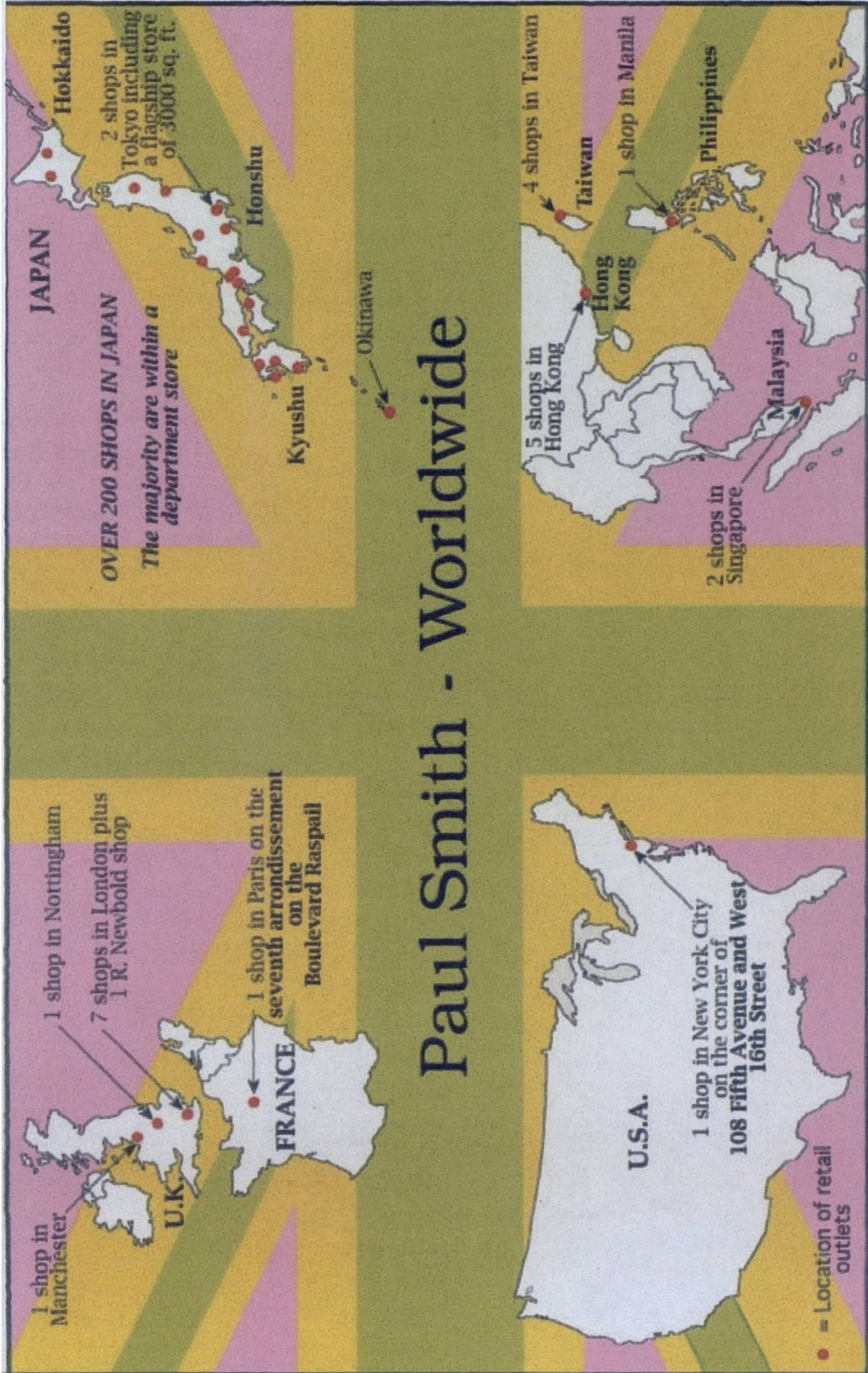
The original Paul Smith shop was a pioneering venture in early 1970s Nottingham, the first designer boutique the city had seen, it stocked emergent and directional names such as Kenzo and Margaret Howell. It still remains as the site of his store today (see chapter five for more detail). Along with this outlet there are currently nine more Paul Smith

shops in England: seven in London, one in Manchester and one R. Newbold shop in London. The latest outlet is Paul Smith's Westbourne House (see chapter five), a throwback to nineteenth century *maison de couture* retailing and located in a residential area of London's trendy Notting Hill. The remit of this store boasts it will alter the very essence of clothes shopping, "outside it's a four-storey Victorian villa; inside, a Whole New Retailing Concept" (Frankel, 1998:10). A cross between a shop and a house, it is pure Paul Smith, quirky, unusual, creative and above all else, a challenge to the minimalism of current designer styles and the blandness of their trading practises. Overseas, Paul Smith stores can be found in countries ranging from the USA to Hong Kong, from France to the Philippines. Most remarkable is the Paul Smith empire in Japan where there are over 200 shops, including a 3000 square feet flagship store in Tokyo. Here, Smith is considered to be *the* leading European designer, selling more than his Italian rivals Versace and Armani, he is often mobbed during his visits to the Far East and even fêted as something of a demi-god. Alongside this extensive retail empire is Smith's equally formidable wholesale business, it spans forty-two countries and eighty per cent of its turnover is from overseas export accounts (see figure 28).

## **ii Jumble sale English**

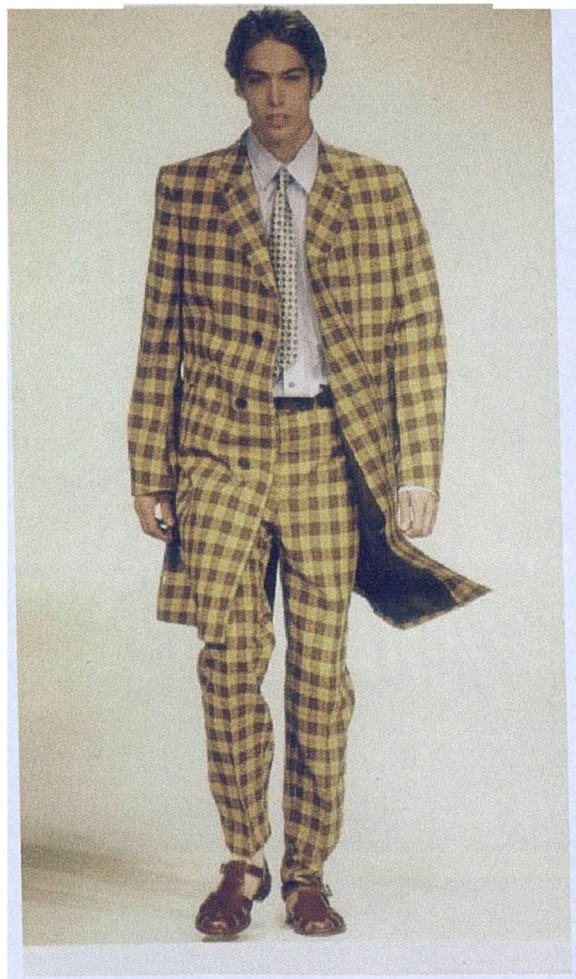
The remarkably successful Paul Smith company, with its global reach and dedicated following, has its origins, however, in a far more humble story, one of self-effacing Nottingham boy-turned-style-guru who remains firmly tied to the Nottingham local economy where he was born and began his business. Aged eighteen and without qualifications or career intentions, it was only a cycling accident that curbed his aspirations of racing stardom and set Paul on the road to iconic fashion status. With a few hundred pounds savings he opened his first shop and traded only on busy Fridays

Figure 28: The location of Paul Smith retail outlets worldwide



and Saturdays. Paul took evening classes at the local polytechnic and with the help of his girlfriend, Pauline Denyer, an RCA graduate in fashion, he gradually built up an increasingly sophisticated and extensive range of products to sell in the boutique. By 1976, Paul Smith was acting as a consultant to an Italian shirt manufacturer and to the International Wool Secretariat. It was at this point that he decided to go it alone and to show his first collection in Paris, a collection founded on British tradition and tailoring (figure 29) but with a keen eye on contemporary influences, what he called "'jumble sale English': old time stripe shirts with tiny collars, waistcoats your grandad might

*Figure 29: Paul Smith menswear, spring/summer 1994. This re-working of a classic 'teddy-boy' suit in bold contemporary checks epitomises the Paul Smith fusion of traditional and modern.*





have worn" (Billen, 1995:42). Throughout the late seventies and early eighties Paul Smith prospered, opening several more retail outlets and in 1984 he signed a licensing contract with the Japanese company 'C. Itoh' (now known as 'Itochu') as a means of breaking into the lucrative Asian Pacific market.

In addition to his prowess as a couture designer, what is remarkable about Paul Smith is his crusade to "demystify" the whole world of design and fashion and make it a far more accessible domain (*Money Programme*, 1995). Not afraid to depart from the élitism of the catwalk and boutique, Paul became a consultant to Marks and Spencer and for over ten years set about introducing such staples as poloshirts and, more spectacularly still, hundreds of different colours into the nation's wardrobes - traditional business suits with shocking pink linings, a city shirt with one green cuff and one blue. Paul Smith's technicolour creations are direct responses to what he terms as the 'Englishman's disease', typified by a tendency to buy "vast quantities of bad clothes" (Paul Smith quoted in Crewe and Goodrum, forthcoming).

It is this mindset, coupled with a very distinctive design aesthetic, that marks Paul Smith out from many of his peers and his blend of retailing and design provides something of a blueprint for the fashion industry. In 1991 his standing as an industrial trailblazer was fully recognised when he was named the British Designer for Industry and also given an award by the British Knitting and Clothing Export Council (BKCEC) in honour of his overseas success. Since then the company has gone from strength to strength and accolades and trophies abound. In 1994 Paul Smith was named C.B.E. on the New Year's honours list for 'services to fashion design' and more recently in 2000 was knighted as 'Sir Paul'. However, perhaps the ultimate consecration of his work

came in 1995 during the company's 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary year when 'True Brit' opened at the Design Museum, London, an exhibition dedicated to Paul's life and work replete with accompanying adulatory book and film collaboration.

The company's financial balance sheet reflects a similarly glowing picture. Paul Smith has been unusual in that he has nurtured his business through one of the longest and deepest world recessions and has continued to increase sales whilst many around him have failed. In 1988 Paul Smith's worldwide turnover topped £10 million, in 1998 the figure had grown to a staggering £171 million, modest to him but immense when placed beside the £1-2million turnover of a 'typical' British designer (Bradberry, 1998:11). Smith is also bucking the trend in Japan, where many companies have been hit by the economic crisis, Paul Smith is thriving and in 1998 the company reported a 37% rise in sales for their R. Newbold brand compared with, for example, Armani's decline of 20%. The company remains entirely self-financed and sales have experienced a year on year growth of between 50% and 60% since 1993.

### **iii A designer democracy?**

Given such financial prowess, what then, is the root of Paul Smith's success in terms of his corporate identity and brand image? Smith is keen to eschew all thoughts of manufactured strategy and shuns the very notion of slick marketing and branding practises: "perhaps what you don't understand" he says "is that nothing has been planned. It is a lot more flippant than that. It is not about selling more. It is not about my label" (quoted in Billen, 1995:42). "Paul Smith has a personality" he says "rather than a corporate image" (quoted in Steiner, 1998:1). Here we see how Paul Smith is quick to underscore his ordinariness and promotes honest, basic and egalitarian values.

The company at large refutes all notions of 'big business' and operates the multi-million pound concern as far as possible as if it were a local shop, with hands-on style management and a commitment to creative independence. Paul argues,

"I prefer the individuality and oddness of corner shops or food shops, or shops where old and modern utilitarian items are sold together". (Blackwell and Burney, 1990:99)

However, behind this 'designer democracy' rhetoric with Paul Smith as the unassuming "Just William of the fashion world" (McDowell, C., 1995: 43), lies a conflicting narrative and a conceptual flaw. For despite his anarchic overtures and his highly persuasive attacks on the materialism of his peers, Paul Smith is very much a part of the fashion establishment. His eccentric and haphazard 'jumble sale English' does not, for instance, come at jumble sale prices - a recent window display in his Floral Street shop in Covent Garden, for example, showcased an outfit consisting of: checked jacket (£615), zipper waistcoat (£175), tie (£45), shirt (£95) watch (£198) and a pair of boots (£175). "Paul Smith is himself an operator" writes C. McDowell (1995: 28), "the very model of a modern manipulator",

"behind his guise of a simple, cloth capped common man with an infantile sense of humour, lurks a marketing brain on the level of a Ralph Lauren. Although he would hotly deny it." (McDowell, C., 1995: 28)

Thus we see a carefully orchestrated paradox appearing. Paul is the self-confessed "John Cleese of fashion" his style being a mix of things - "traditional British tailoring with street style, a mishmash of Monty Python and Paul Weller" (Jones, 1995c: 3). He frowns on the bland, sanitised identities of an over-saturated retail environment and the

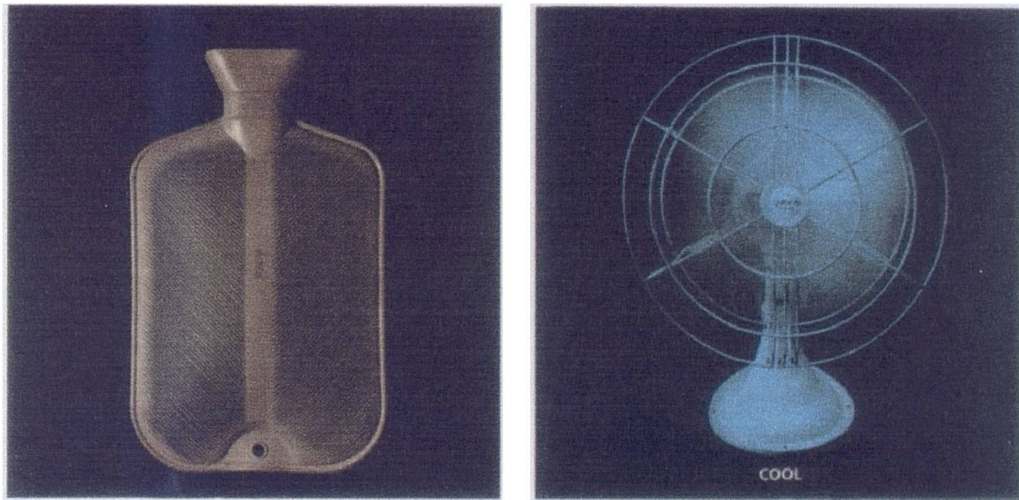
"uptight" images of rival fashion houses (Drapers Record, 1998: 18). Yet, whilst Paul Smith is quick to denigrate the marketeering and contrivances of many of his peers, he too, no matter how loud his protestations, is fundamentally involved in selling an image. His clothes are distinctive and the philosophy behind them - of a "simplicity of style characterised by wit and humour" (Rombough, 1997:39) - is so well appreciated that adverts no longer have to even feature Paul Smith apparel, such is the strength of the company's identity.

A typical example of this well cultivated identity at work is the R. Newbold spring/summer 1997 press campaign, a daringly low-tech shoot where the design team hired a passport photo-booth for a week, placed it in the R. Newbold shop in London and asked customers to do whatever they wanted in it, the resulting photographs, embellished with only the tiniest of logos, ending up as the sum total of the season's advertising. Another example is the Paul Smith sale invitations of 1994 (see figure 30), where 'cool' images such as ice lollies and electric fans announced summer bargains, and 'hot' images such as electric stove elements, hot water bottles and irons were used to promote the winter sale - all of these witty incursions lay testimony to the clever, subtle, yet undeniably engineered, images that make up the essence of Paul Smith's identity, one where we are invited to buy his sensibility first and his clothing second.

The narratives surrounding Smith's emergence as a sartorial authority, then, seem to hinge around a series of contradictions: anarchic and dismissive of big business, Paul Smith is at the same time a spokesperson for British design and a cornerstone of the homegrown establishment; the company is at once a symbol of provincial parochiality *and* an icon of the new metropolitan urban chic; Smith's style is deeply nostalgic yet

also progressive and avant-garde; he is steeped in British sartorial tradition yet disrupts conventional design aesthetics and scrambles fashion's signs and symbols - the floral suit, the photo-printed budgie waistcoat, the strip-cartoon trousers, the pistachio-coloured tweeds. Such confusions within, and surrounding, the organisation are very

*Figure 30: Paul Smith sale invitations 1994. 'Warm' images promoted the winter sale (left), whilst 'cool' images (right) were used for summer.*



significant, for they have shaped its evolution and continue to form the basis of its identity. Also contradictory are the connections (and confusions) between Paul Smith the designer, Paul Smith the label and Paul Smith the organisation. The blurring of these boundaries, in all their complexity, providing yet another example of a corporate identity characterised through its "narratives of ambiguity" (Pratt, 1992: 126). As D. Jones (1995a: 37) argues, Paul Smith,

"mixed English tailoring with modern fabrics.... He made fashion work for men in a completely new way. It was all about juxtaposition, and that became his signature.... Bridging the gap between the salon and the street. Ivy League with a glottal stop. 'He managed to combine two strands of the British character,' says Peter Howarth, Arena

Editor and former Style Director of British GQ, 'which is innate conservatism with flashes of eccentricity'." (Jones, D., 1995a: 37)

#### **iv Designs on Britain**

Nowhere are these narratives of juxtaposition more pertinent than in Paul's head-on engagement with government policy and in his political wranglings. Forever controversial, Paul Smith has spoken out repeatedly against the British attitude to design and designers and is very vocal in expressing his 'disappointment' in the state of the nation vis-à-vis fashion and creative talent. He argues how in Britain,

"we are dealing with a history of negativeness...It's all about attitude, investment, the attitude of government and of management to creative people. A designer in the UK is not a designer. They are sent out to copy. It's despicable. Whoever wanted yesterday's news? In Italy a designer creates, on a board, from a blank page. It's a massive difference. For example, if M&S ask for a new sock range, the UK manufacturer comes up with black and brown and hideous designs. Japan come up with hundreds of colour ranges. We lose designers all the time to Europe. This year I placed 16 students in jobs. None are in the UK.... We have a unique situation in the UK, dominance by chain stores. The British man is brainwashed into cheap and cheerful. Lots of bad clothes". (Smith quoted in Crewe and Goodrum, forthcoming)

As the golden boy of British fashion, Paul Smith is certainly the most successful designer who has chosen to stay and work in the UK. Other designers have fled abroad, gone bust or are struggling with turnovers. Yet in spite of his success, Paul Smith is an open critic of the national regulatory body, the British Fashion Council (BFC) and his attitude to the BFC annual junket, London Fashion Week, remains ambivalent. Therefore whilst being a figurehead of the industry, Paul Smith is simultaneously irritated by the self-congratulatory tenor of that same industry, deeming London Fashion Week to be nothing more than a smoke screen, an exercise in PR gloss whilst

the fashion sector and the country at large continues to let its designers down. Paul elaborates:

"I design clothes, but I love to see everyday objects change by good design. Unfortunately though, a lot of British manufacturers have no idea what good design can do for them. Britain used to be famous for manufacturing and designing some of the best things in the world. Now it seems we just supply the talent for foreign companies to sell things back to us. What I want to do is change our industry's attitudes towards designer's".  
(*Made in Britain* documentary:1995)

Such is Paul's rancour with the inadequacies and non-support of British industry and government alike, he has refused to show his catwalk collections in London claiming "it's not where the business is" (Smith in Frankel, 1998a:2). Britain has a poor infrastructure where clothing is concerned and is viewed internationally as being unprofessional and often branded as immature, "there was too much hype" says Smith "and not enough focus on getting well-made clothes manufactured and sold" (quoted in Tredre, 1998:6). He continues, "the normal comment after a fashion week in Britain is: 'Who'd wear that?' And it's all attention seeking stuff" (Smith in *Drapers Record*, 1998:18). Paul Smith instead chooses the Parisian fashion scene in which to exhibit his newest creations. Here he believes his designs receive far more serious recognition and argues,

"designers could and should, choose to support London Fashion Week, but when London is the third choice on the fashion map after Milan and Paris, they choose to go abroad".  
(Smith, P., 1995: 57).

Doubtless Paul Smith's most infamous anti-establishment gesture was registered in 1992, when, frustrated by the continuing decline and second-rate status of national

fashion, he turned down his BFC Designer of the Year award, deeming it to be, in such a negative climate, too indulgent and celebratory. Smith explains that,

"Some of our leading talent has long since opted out of British Fashion Week, preferring instead the sophisticated facilities of bodies such as France's *Chambre Syndicale* and Italy's *Pitti Immagine*, both of which have the financial backing of their own industry and government. The British Fashion Council, unfortunately, has very little. And it shows. Three years ago I declined my nomination as British Designer of the Year. My main reason for turning down the award was to try and highlight the problems of the British fashion industry. I see no advantage in continued self-congratulatory events when our own design industry is so insignificant in world terms. The hard facts remain: the business is done abroad". (Smith, P., 1995:56-7)

What we are seeing here is Paul Smith as part of an extremely paradoxical relationship. "British fashion's biggest success story" (Frankel, 1998a:14) and patriotic to a fault, he is also British fashion's most vociferous critic, galvanising revolutionary notions and fostering anti-establishment sentiments. An even further twist is added with Paul's recent conscription, as a 'captain of British industry', to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport's 'Creative Industry Task Force'. In this role we not only find him as British ambassador, consultant and troubleshooter, but we also find him as uniquely positioned, spanning the confluence between 'grass roots' industry and macro-level governmental directives. Paul's list of credentials are testimony to his versatility - this breadth of scope positing him as *the* "force to be reckoned with" (Holgate, 1998:197) on the national style scene. "His influence on the culture and the dynamics of the industry in the Millennium" writes the industry's press, "will be incalculable" (*Menswear*, 1999:3).

In this chapter I have mapped out the changing face of Britishness - itself a contested and contestable concept - as well as the instabilities that characterise that change.



Superimposed on top of this is then a second clutch of ruptures, those we have seen emerging within the 'banal' arena of fashion and, more specifically, within the corporate identities of those companies - Mulberry and Paul Smith - who rely on Britishness as an important tool in their strategic and branding practises. As their different stories unfold, we see that Mulberry, on the one hand, is struggling to reconcile its position within the British fashion industry - swamped by the opposing forces of change and continuity, uncertain of its future and dogged by indecision. On the other, we see Paul Smith revelling in such pervasive contradictory narratives, turning them to its advantage and building an enviably successful operation on their very strength. In turn, Smith's successful corporate formula provides us with a fascinating insight into the condition of lifestyle brands and the contemporary marketplace at large. For these discourses of contradiction, juxtaposition and ambiguity are increasingly emerging (as I discussed in chapter two) as value-adding factors in a world of consumption where "diversity sells" (Robertson, 1995:29) - their very contrariness offering a range of options to the truly modern consumer who both requires and desires a wealth of identities to be at their disposal and to quench their demands for 'plurality' in the marketplace. Jackson *et al* (1999:365), highlight this trend towards contradiction in their study of men's lifestyle magazines (see also chapter six), the 'appeal of the paradox' being attractive to a readership consisting,

"guys in their twenties [who] have one foot in either camp. They want to have fun, but they're ambitious too. They want mates but they also want a girlfriend".

(Soutar quoted in Jackson *et al*, 1999b:365)

In a similar vein Ballaster *et al* (1991: 7) reflect on the contradictory appeal of women's magazines, suggesting that,

"The identification of 'contradiction'...fails to embarrass either editors, writers or readers. Indeed...the success of the women's magazine is no doubt connected with its ability to encompass glaring contradiction coherently in its pages".

(Ballaster *et al*, 1991:7)

Here we see (just as in chapter two) how the popular lifestyle press - a cultural industry parallel to that of fashion and design - is increasingly identifying a niche in the market related to paradox and contradiction. As Bourdieu (1984) suggests, a new type of hedonistic consumer is emerging, a consumer no longer regulated by an 'economy of needs' but rather by an 'economy of desire and dreams'. In the following chapter, I turn to look still further at this emerging economy. For these desires and dreams take on a particular significance in the export activities of the British fashion industry. The shape and form of these exports are heavily influenced, as we shall see, by certain 'imaginative geographies' of Britishness, ingrained across certain fashion products (including those of Mulberry and of Paul Smith). With exports, geographical proximity, speed of response, as well as high freight costs and duties, all pose substantial economic barriers to market competitiveness. Therefore, in order to explain (at least in part) the success and popularity of selected British fashion brands overseas, we have to look at the, as yet underexplored, power of consumer 'dreams' and the mythologies of Britishness that surround these exports. In particular, the following chapter examines the case of the Anglo-Japanese export industry (for we have already seen the immense popularity of British fashion - and particularly of Mulberry and Paul Smith - in this market). In so doing, I develop my on-going contention that the globalisation of (British) fashion comprises a far more *culturally*-fuelled web of transactions - over and above a product's intrinsic 'value for money' and other such 'rational' economic analyses - than has previously been posited.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Rising Sun, Setting Trends: Exporting British fashion

#### 4.1 Imperial Camp: Fashion and empire

Just "when does the 'age of empire' begin and end?" asks Driver, for "...in what we might perhaps describe as the discourse of imperial camp<sup>10</sup>, we find new incarnations of older imperial tropes" (1993:615). Nowhere is this resurgence of (neo-) imperialist sentiment more evident than in the world of consumption where, according to hooks (1992:21) "ethnicity" is viewed as the "seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture", the commodification of Otherness being a product of the (European) geographical imagination, both providing a "little taste of something more exotic" (May, 1996:57) whilst also shaping "the material practices of imperialism". From the Empire Marketing Board and its advertising campaigns during 1920s and 30s Britain (Constantine, 1986; Willis, 1991), to the more recent vogue in 'exotic' goods such as holidays (Beezer, 1993; Urry, 1990), food (Cook, 1995; Cook and Crang, 1996; Enloe, 1989) and even bathroom toiletries (Crang, 1996), the imaginative geographies of Orientalism (Saïd, 1978) have been produced, bolstered and consumed via fetishised commodities.

In this chapter, I explore how contemporary British fashion is involved in this neo-imperial project, how it enlists imperialist discourses in order to exploit the consumer imagination and how it indulges a British 'look' that is imagined as "traditional, upright and earnest, reminiscent of the days of Empire" (Franklin, 1996:17). Still further, this

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<sup>10</sup> Driver offers us a further note of explanation on his use of the term 'imperial camp'. "In Britain, at least" he writes, "fantasies about the exploits of imperial heroes continue, despite everything, to exert a powerful influence over the public sphere" (Driver, 1993: 615). Imperial camp, then, refers to the exaggerated - literally 'the camping up' of - an aesthetic reminiscent of the days of Empire.

exploration sets about developing the contentions of previous chapters whereby the very concept of fashion as a uniquely western phenomenon and marker of civilisation - "represented in terms of imperialistic intentions to take over the world of clothes, and thereby extinguish other [non-western] systems" (Craik, 1994:26) - has already been discussed and problematised (see especially section 2.7). In particular this chapter deals with the *export* of British fashion and in so doing it reverses the insular 'gaze' of existing research on cultural industry - and particularly designer fashion - which to date, whilst noting the significance of export markets, has focused more on retailing within, or supply networks to, the UK (for example, Crewe and Davenport, 1992). Therefore, borrowing from the cases of Mulberry and Paul Smith, this chapter looks at the outward movement of cultural exports from Britain (recall my discussion of the 'circuits' of consumption and of culture in chapter two and in section 2.8 in particular). Furthermore, it suggests that whilst the penetration of overseas markets by British brands does indeed *confirm* this discourse of 'imperial camp', with its 'wilful nostalgia' (a concept discussed over the course of chapters one, two and three) and metaphors of appropriation and conquest, it also suggests that these two brands simultaneously *disrupt* such imperial tropes. Instead it posits the export of British fashion as being a locally sensitised encounter, one which demonstrates a remarkable cultural awareness of different markets, different peoples and places; a flexibly specialised targeting and knowledge of niche markets, as well as an understanding of the intricacies of global-local relations. However before I explore Mulberry and Paul Smith's export practices in more detail, I want to take a general look at how British fashion operates - and has operated - overseas, paying attention to different national-level export directives and the imaginative geographies of national identity that are bound up within them.

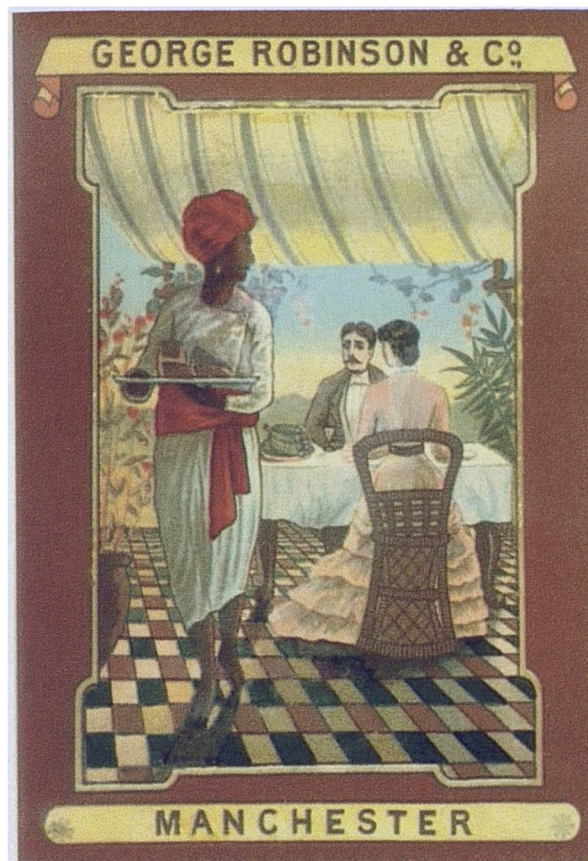
In colonial conquest, "clothes", writes C. McDowell (1984:10) "were a tool of oppression", a weapon of struggle between the colonisers and colonised. Craik (1994:26) elaborates on this sentiment, suggesting how, in the 'theatre of empire', clothing became a valuable material representation of, and social marker for, distinctions of race, gender and social rank, so that,

"in conjunction with conventional techniques of persuasion and acculturation, dress codes were often treated as integral to the process of subjugation". (Craik, 1994:26)

Certainly in the case of British imperial expansion at the turn of the twentieth century, the symbolism of dress played a potent part in the exercise and performance of imperial domination (Breward, 1999). For example, the rituals and strict codes ensconced in British colonisers attire - the military uniforms, professional clothing and ceremonial wear - served not only to underscore visually their "innate superiority" (Callaway, 1992:235) but also served to reinforce their British national allegiance, their British values and above all else, their intrinsic 'Britishness' even when 'displaced' (Crang, 1996) amidst 'exotic' places and cultures (figure 31). For example, Leith-Ross (quoted in Callaway, 1992:234) travelled frequently to Nigeria between 1907 and 1968 as the bride of a colonial officer. She explains how the quintessentially British ritual of 'dressing for dinner' in even the most incongruous surroundings of the African bush took on an extremely nationalised significance to do with British civility, order and national standards in what was imagined as 'darkest Africa'. She comments,

"When you are alone, among thousands of unknown, unpredictable people, dazed by unaccustomed sights and sounds, bemused by strange ways of life and thought, you need to remember who you are, where you come from, what your standards are".

(Leith-Ross in Callaway, 1992:234)



*Figure 31: The wardrobe of conquest. As this advertisement from c. 1910 illustrates, dress was a powerful visual marker of Britishness and of difference in the imperial project. The western couple are dressed for dinner - the gentleman in three-piece lounge suit, the lady in an elaborate gown. Their formal, starched and impractical dress is incongruous against the tented backdrop and the exotic flora and fauna of their colonial environs. The costume of the ethnic figure-in-waiting also serves to underscore the power hierarchy. Barefoot and mysterious (in contrast to the white male in this image, no facial features have been picked out on the servant) his colourful sash and head-dress go against the sombre conventions of western male attire and 'proper' British masculinity (see chapter six for further discussion).*

Here we begin to see how dress and the public and ritualised displays that were associated with it - "of stiff formality and aloofness...power and authority in a bravura of colour and style" (Callaway, 1992:233) - were central to the performance of a distinctively British project of imperialism, both 'at home' and 'abroad'. Dress was a means of familiarising and domesticating an otherwise 'savage' and 'exotic' culture, it was a reminder of 'home' and 'homeland', as well as being symbolic of British national values and ideal citizenship. In turn, this same imperial project, with its westernising

agenda and privileged gaze, was to give Britain one of its most defining and enduring sartorial styles, one in which "ladies in hats still figure as do men in formal tailoring" (Shilling in de la Haye, 1996:196-7). Thus, the act of national conquest went hand in hand with a very specific 'wardrobe of conquest', itself inscribed with a set of 'British' mores to do with good demeanour, breeding and correctness of appearance. This version of Britishness was an exercise in the representation of national belonging and character.

#### **4.2 Imperialist Nostalgia: Walpole's promotion of 'British excellence'**

What is interesting is the extent to which this version of Britain and Britishness, embodied and mobilised through imperial style and clothing, still dominates the contemporary global style circuit today. With clothing and textiles as the ninth largest export sector in the UK, exporting £3 billion-worth of products per year and employing almost 320,000 people, British fashion is a significant concern overseas. In Europe, Sweden is the country that "puts Brits on a pedestal" (Weizman, 1997: 19), whilst globally, Japan has taken over from the USA as the number one export market for British clothing and accessories (Taplin, 1998:27). The popularity of British products in these markets is equated directly to the national imagery that accompanies them, as Weizman, commentating on the Swedish enthusiasm for 'buying British' (1997: 19) argues,

"The fact is that many Swedes really do admire and aspire to what they believe to be Britishness, an idealised concept of perfect manners, wry humour, understated but elegant dressing, classic design and quality". (Weizman, 1997: 19)

Similarly, the *Nikkei Weekly*, one of Tokyo's leading journals reports that,

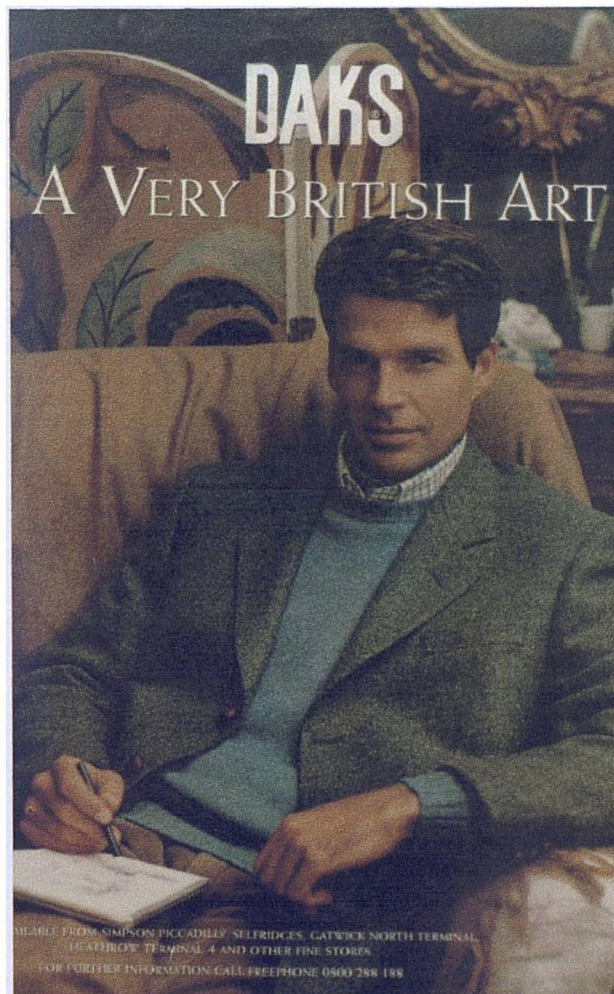
"Japan seems to be appropriating British lifestyle icons in its endless craving for fashion inputs. Amuro's [a young, female, Japanese pop diva] miniskirt, a Burberry Blue Label garment, became an instant bestseller following her media address.... Other venerable brands such as Aquascutum and Margaret Howell are also sharply increasing their sales, as are Argyle women's sweaters, with their characteristic diamond patterns. The popularity of British fairs in Tokyo is another sign of the boom. In October, Tobu Department Store Co. held its first at its Ikebukuro store. Gardening goods and black tea from Britain were among the most popular items. A store spokesperson said that stressed-out Japanese think they can learn from the British lifestyle, characterized by weekends in the country and hobbies such as gardening."

*(Nikkei Weekly, 22<sup>nd</sup> December, 1997)*

The British 'look' is synonymous with a legacy of country weekends, tea drinking and sedate pastimes, of a commodified set of national values that are infused with an 'idealised concept' of Britishness. Within all of this, British fashion is tailored to the Japanese imagination and is confined to a partial vision revolving around the key notions of eccentricity, of classic branding and of exquisite standards (and I will go on to develop these three key notions in the second half of this chapter - see section 4.5). Therefore, along with the export of British clothing and fashion, we see an accompanying export of British signs, symbols and characteristics, all of which feed and fuel a geographical imagination in which Britishness is inextricably linked to a golden age of empire. Rosaldo (1993:69) has termed this imagining as "imperialist nostalgia", a concept in which a pose of "innocent yearning" is used both to capture people's imagination as well as to conceal its complicity with, often brutal, domination. The commodification of imperialism within the fashion industry is involved, therefore, not only with the nostalgic evocation of a glorious and romanticised bygone age, where Britain stood as a symbol of civility, progress and decency, but this imperialist nostalgia is also involved with a systematic forgetting, one where marginal histories go unheard and where "a mood of nostalgia makes", for example, "racial domination appear innocent and pure" (Rosaldo, 1993:68). So we see that a 'double commodity fetishism'



(Cook and Crang, 1996; Sack, 1993) operates within high fashion exports, a fetishism in which products are ingrained both with value-adding knowledges that remember and celebrate an imperial past, but also with ignorances in which the darker side of British expansionism remains untold.



*Figure 32: DAKS, A Very British Art. This advertisement epitomises the 'imperial camp' that dominates a particular niche in the style market. The featured clothes are 'very British' in a classically tweedy way, whilst the wider setting - the antiques and heirlooms in the background - bolster ideas of traditional, solid values and the 'family line'. Also note that the 'small print' tells us that DAKS can be purchased from the 'fine stores' Simpson and Selfridges as well as at Gatwick and Heathrow. These airport terminals are worthy of special mention in the ad because of the large overseas custom and the 'touristic quality' (Lash and Urry, 1994 - see also section 4.3) of the DAKS brand. This advertisement was placed in the Sunday supplements of quality British and foreign press.*

These discourses of imperialist nostalgia are apparent, as we shall see, at a variety of levels within the fashion industry. Nationally, one of the emerging industrial players in the promotion of British commodities overseas is the Walpole Committee, a private trade association, founded in 1992, but already considered as the foremost organisation of its kind (emulating its French equivalent, the renowned '*Comité Colbert*', a well-established consortium of luxury goods manufacturers). The Committee is unrivalled in its standing as *the* commercial promoter of Britishness and British products. Among its forty members, who boast to be "the cream of British companies" (Walpole Committee brochure:vi), are Halcyon Days (enamels), Jaguar (cars), Taylor's of Harrogate (tea), the Royal Shakespeare Company, as well as a number of iconic British fashion companies including, Mulberry, DAKS Simpson (see figure 32), Tanner Krolle, Henry Poole and Holland & Holland, themselves all aspirational, luxurious and exclusive organisations synonymous with solid Old World values and conjuring visions of Britain-past.

The Walpole Committee was established to "promote British excellence", its mission being "to enhance the reputation of British goods and services, in the UK and overseas, with increased vigour" (press release, 1997). As L. Smith (1996: 22) argues,

"The Walpole Committee, like any exclusive club, intends to stay small, admitting as members only those names that represent the core values of the committee. Whatever your trade - be it in Savile Row tailoring engineering a Land Rover or a precision-made gun, distilling gin, baking traditional Scottish shortbread or running a 500-year-old country inn like the Lygon Arms in the Cotswolds - you have to be the best."

(Smith, L., 1996: 22)

These claims to exclusivity, coupled with highly selective membership criteria ("less glamorous businesses like engineering or computers need not apply" Finch, 1997: 16) embrace only the best and most 'authentic' of national organisations. They suggest that

the Walpole Committee is all about forging a portrait of Britain in "the spirit of old-line tradition" (Smith, L., 1996: 22). Taking its name from an eighteenth century statesman and commercial minister, the Committee is keen to emulate Sir Robert Walpole's<sup>11</sup> own energetic promotion of British overseas trade during the 1700s and to celebrate the traditional values, heritage and "Great Britishness" that formed its basis (Walpole Committee website). The members of the Committee, are self-proclaimed "giants in a global village" promoting their Britishness via "exacting standards", "uncompromising adherence to quality", "respect for tradition" and underscoring a national (life-)style rich in nostalgia and 'imperial camp', arguing that,

"As consumers grow tired of the blandness of much of what is on offer today, goods and services with a character that is quintessentially British are becoming increasingly desirable and marketable...*since the days of Empire, British brands have travelled across the globe.* In today's increasingly competitive international markets, their distinctive qualities are still in great demand".

(Walpole Committee website, emphasis added)

Here Britishness is viewed by the Walpole Committee as a valuable marketing tool and as a means to product distinction and differentiation. Yet this same version of Britishness, flogged from country to country by the Committee in their week-long PR offensives also strikes the 'innocent pose' that we have seen as characterising imperialist nostalgia. The parties, product showcases ('toast the finer things in life with the MacKinnon<sup>12</sup> family's ambrosial Drambuie'), photographic exhibitions ('Earl Lichfield's

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<sup>11</sup> Walpole was, of course, Britain's first Prime Minister and Leader of the Whigs. As winners of the Glorious Revolution and protectors of the 1689 Settlement, the Whigs championed Protestant causes and Freedom of the Individual - ideologies that many historical and social commentators would argue are the very essence of Britishness (see Plumb, 1967, on Walpole).

<sup>12</sup> The citing of specific family connections as illustrated in the case of the McKinnon family here (and also Earl Lichfield) provides an interesting commentary on the personalisation of British branding. As we shall see over the course of this chapter, the 'authentication' of products through the use of deeply personalised histories and family folklore is a successful export strategy, one that enables overseas consumers to sample, and to participate in, a slice of 'real'

Britain') and lectures ('The Competitive Edge of the British Brand') that make up the Committee's overseas itinerary garnish the British products - and by default - the Britain and Britishness they are employed to promote, with emblems of Empire, national superiority and the accoutrements of conquest. Bulldogs, militaria, country manors, Union Jacks and liveried servants, for example, all adorn the Walpole Committee's official documentation. Added to this is the Committee's accompanying aggressive, and overbearing, media rhetoric, where, in a similar vein, it is boasted that these PR drives, held annually in Continental Europe, the Far East and the United States are attempts at the "conquest" (Fallon, 1996: 9) of foreign markets by what have been named as the formidable British "Walpole warriors" (*The Times*, 1996: 44).

What we are seeing here is one of Britain's most high profile trade organisations, charged with the task of showcasing both British products and British identity to export markets, involved in bolstering an image to foreign buyers where 'Made in Britain' equals "antique, eccentric, backward...haphazard and part of cottage industry" (Finch, 1997: 16). By using neo-imperialist tropes to inscribe their products with an aura of nostalgia the Walpole Committee acts as a chief cultural intermediary in the translation of Britishness abroad. Furthermore it is the very specific nature of this British style, as well as its continued buttressing via the strength and cachet of organisations such as the Walpole Committee, that means the image of Britain globally is still couched as "distinctly old fashioned. London is still thought of as foggy and most Japanese," for example, "are more familiar with Peter Rabbit and the Beatles than with the Teletubbies and the Spice Girls" (Watts, 1998:10). The pervading image of Britain and British style in export markets is therefore largely one that by-passes contemporary times, favouring

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British history. Certainly Mulberry and Paul Smith exploit this strategy, as both companies emphasise their respective man-behind-the-label.

an association instead with heritage-based Britain and supporting this association with British products that suitably reflect such a bygone mood: traditional-recipe biscuits, age-old malt whisky, timeless marquetry techniques, Huddersfield worsted suiting.

In the following section I go on to examine how this dominant portrayal of national style has impacted on the export of British fashion and specifically on the export of British fashion to Japan. For the Japanese fashion scene provides us with a fascinating account of the complexities involved in exporting Britishness - a scene that at once endorses and delights in the nostalgia of classic British fashion but a scene that simultaneously is the prime target of a UK-based campaign set to overthrow these same nostalgic perceptions under the modernising and, it is hoped, more profitable campaign of 'Cool Britannia'.

#### **4.3 It's All Top Hats and Crinolines: UK fashion in Japan**

Clothing is Japan's second largest import worth almost £12 billion annually. Britain is responsible for providing almost £232 million of this business (Action Japan, *Export Facts* brochure 1997:4; Taplin, 1998:27) and with Japan as Britain's number one export market for clothing the importance of bilateral fashion ties between the two countries is second-to-none. With this in mind, the 'Action Japan' campaign, a partnership between the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) and British industry, aimed at increasing exports to and investment in Japan, has been set in place. 'Festival UK98', was the partnership's flagship campaign, a year long programme of over one hundred events throughout Japan celebrating this burgeoning Anglo-Japanese exchange. As the biggest ever exposition of British science, sport, art and commerce to be staged in Japan, the

major aim of the festival was to "update the image of Britain" (Watts, 1998:10). Tactics throughout the year included contemporary film, music and art showcases,



Figure 33: Updating the image of Britain. 'British Issue' is a daily British fashion supplement produced in Japan by the Japanese publishers Senken Shimbun. This copy of British Issue (distributed in the run-up to FestivalUK) has Britpop stars, the Spice Girls on its cover with the accompanying headline 'Modern Traditionalists: The UK fashion industry addresses its future'.

performances by British buskers in a mock-up of Covent Garden, as well as major city department stores being encouraged, in the spirit of 'English gardening' to replace their bonsai trees with racks of flower seeds, potted shrubs, lawnmowers and garden gnomes. As the DTI Japanese clothing and textiles export promoter explains,

"this [Festival UK98] is something that was arranged between the government and the Japan government. That we would have a year, just to again make the Japanese aware of what is going on in Britain and not. Many people have this perceived idea of Britain which is huntin', fishin', shootin' and Harris tweed. I've come across that. And again there are certain establishments in Japan that really don't know what Britain's about".

(Author's interview)

Along with strengthening trading links between Britain and Japan then, we see here that the primary concern of the festival is a renewal of Britain's identity (figure 33), of the imposition of a set of approved images of New Britain and Britishness onto 'the Japanese' having been jointly prepared by the DTI (a government body) and several national voluntary organisations such as the British Tourist Authority (BTA), the British Council, and the British Knitting and Clothing Export Council (BKCEC). Over the past few years, these organisations have become increasingly vocal about their dissatisfaction with the Japanese perception of Britain, deeming it to be old-fashioned, inaccurate and in desperate need of changing. (See also figure 34 for an account of how my own dealings with the DTI were informed by this institutional dissatisfaction). This 'inaccuracy' is attributed to a two-pronged failing: where weak British-based representations *to* Japan are combined with the blinkered views of retailers *in* Japan

Figure 34: Methodology Box

*The corporate interviewer - expert or ignoramus?*

**A Little Knowledge Can Be a Dangerous Thing:  
The corporate interviewer - expert or ignoramus?**

The study of élite groups - such as those I encountered during my research in the fashion industry - raises many issues on the negotiation of power and status between the researcher and the researched. Here I discuss some of these issues in relation to my interview-based research and how my experiences of interviewing corporate élites suggest that the power dynamics involved in 'studying up' are far more complex and more fluid than have often been described in past accounts (Cochrane, 1998; Hughes and Cormode, 1998).

McDowell (1998) debates the advantages and disadvantages of the different roles that the élite group interviewer may assume during an interview. Most pertinently she looks at different strategies in which the interviewer may 'play' either 'expert' or 'ignoramus', either 'supplicant' or 'whiz-kid' and the effects that these contrasting roles may have on the type of relations and knowledges that are constructed through, and born out of, the interview process.

Whilst the interviewer has tended to be cast in positions of greater authority and control *vis-à-vis* the interviewee (because the interviewer generally sets the agenda and because social

research has, broadly speaking tended to focus on comparatively powerless groups), when it comes to interviewing élites - by very definition a group accustomed to 'being in control' and exerting authority over others - the power hierarchy is far more complex than this simple interviewer-as-powerful/interviewee-as-powerless fracture (Schoenberger, 1991).

Certainly with regard to my own research, I found that my relative power, authority and control as a researcher and as an interviewer constantly shifted as my relations in the field constantly developed. These transitory power relativities are best illustrated with an example taken from my dealings with the 'Japan desk' at the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI).

Having a particular interest in clothing exports to Japan, I approached the Japan desk in the early stages of my research with the intention of interviewing several key players in Anglo-Japanese trade relations. However, as I discussed in figure 24, my 'cold calling', my lack of contacts and of cultural capital meant that I was supplied with only the most basic of literature on the export of fashion and my requests for a face-to-face meeting fell on deaf ears.

It was only several months later that I received a rather fraught telephone call directly from the DTI Japanese export promoter himself. Following a presentation I gave at the Institute of British Geographers (IBG) conference, some newspaper reports featuring my work on Anglo-Japanese exports appeared in the national daily press (see appendix three). The export promoter had seen these reports and duly expressed some concerns over my new found 'status' as a (so-called) 'expert' in his field of business. In particular he felt that that the press articles were potentially very damaging to the DTI's 'Festival UK98' (see section 4.3) campaign and its modernising agenda set to 'update the image of Britain' in Japan. By attracting the headlines 'Exports Peddle Imperial Image' and 'Nations Live Down to Their Stereotypes', the DTI representative felt I had acted irresponsibly in disseminating research that seemed to go against his own campaign of modernisation (although these press articles provided only a very brief, and somewhat sensationalised, snapshot of my original paper).

Certainly the power politics in this encounter provide an interesting discourse on the character of élite groups. For we see here, in this telephone call, how the DTI promoter was very keen on demonstrating his 'superior' knowledge of the Japanese export market in comparison to my own relative ignorance, my apparently 'inaccurate' portrait of Anglo-Japanese exports, and my 'uninformed' opinion on doing fashion business.

What is interesting is how this rather hostile encounter actually developed into a very fruitful and valuable research relationship characterised by a complex web of power dynamics. For example, during the telephone call in question I 'played' to a clearly structured power hierarchy (McDowell, 1998; O'Connell Davidson and Layder, 1994; Schoenberger, 1991; Valentine, 1997). I was keen to get 'on side' with the export promoter and therefore deliberately assumed the role of supplicant. In 'playing dumb' and stating my eagerness to tap into his own expert knowledge and wealth of experience in the export field, I was able to arrange the much sought after interview that had eluded me for so long. Quite surprisingly, however, during the actual interview, I found that I was invested with considerably more power and control than I had anticipated, with the export promoter being keen to answer my questions rather than to impose his own agenda on me and my research (which I thought might be the case, given the circumstances of our encounter and the disquiet he had already expressed with my research). It is perhaps even more surprising, then, that the promoter did not place any caveats on the use and dissemination of our interview together. I offered to send the promoter a copy of the complete transcript and to invest in him the 'right of veto' so that any commercially sensitive information or comments unsuitable for the public domain might be 'edited out'. My offer was, however, refused and 'having put the record straight' the export promoter felt there was no further need to see draft copies of my writing or to 'verify' my subsequent academic arguments or discussions in any way.

So we see how a chance encounter and a lucky sequence of events came to have an extremely profitable outcome, allowing me to gain access to, and to interview in great depth, (an otherwise unattainable) key informant. Furthermore, this encounter also illustrates how the relationships between interviewer and interviewee evolve throughout the entire interview process - a process that ranges far beyond the hour or two when the tape player is recording - the 'wider context' beyond the actual 'face-to-face part' of the interview also supplying its own rich commentary on the (élite) group under study (Herod, 1993).



only interested in investing in, and thereby perpetuating, a classic Anglo-British style - a style that we saw touted by the likes of the Walpole Committee - and one that is ultimately held to account by the DTI and its commercial counterparts for the general narrowness of Japanese imaginings. As Putnam in Finch (1997: 16) bemoans,

"We do the past very well in this country, but how can we compete from a high-tech point of view when the rest of the world sees us dressed up in top hats and crinolines all the time".  
(Putnam in Finch, 1997: 16)

Doubtless, when it comes to British fashion, the dominant Japanese perception is indeed one entrenched in a nostalgia for times gone by, of "Mr Darcy and his costume drama cronies" who have so enchanted appreciative worldwide audiences with their period looks that they were recently branded as a "hinderance" to Cool Britannia and its programme of modernisation (Finch, 1997: 16). To a considerable degree, therefore, the British 'look' in Japan has been influenced by an imaginative geography and its attendant social spatialisations, of a Britain reputed for eccentricity, for high quality, classic clothing and for exacting standards (refer to section 4.5 for more detail). As Ledgerwood (1995:16), a BKCEC executive, comments in her extensive analysis of the British fashion export market in Japan,

"Many [Japanese] buyers look only for Shetland fairisles and classic Scottish lambswools and cashmeres because that is what the Japanese consumer knows and because the buyers are not trained to take risks.... Most of the retailers I spoke to [during a fact-finding mission to Japan] who bought from the UK bought only knitwear or mostly knitwear...because they felt other items were not as strongly associated with the UK and would therefore be more difficult to promote. A comment I heard frequently, from retailers, importers and manufacturers alike, was that, apart from high class, traditional merchandise, 'the Japanese consumer is unwilling to accept other products from the UK'".  
(Ledgerwood, 1995:16)

From this, it seems that both Japanese retailers and Japanese consumers covet British fashion for its intrinsic *Britishness*. However, as I illustrate here with several quotations from members of the Japanese industry (quoted in Ledgerwood, 1997:12-13), this Britishness must satisfy strict criteria on what is imagined as British style, fit, character and even monetary value in order for it to be positively received. So for example,

"Lower priced merchandise from the UK is not saleable; it conflicts with the Japanese image of the UK".  
(Japanese department store representative)

British fashion is "tartan, traditional, hard, classic, not avant garde".  
(Japanese manufacturer, wholesaler and retailer)

"In the past we have imported knitwear from the UK but, as we are targeting the younger woman, Italy is a more suitable supply; the UK is too conservative and is more suitable for men's knitwear. UK is classic, Italy is fashion".  
(Japanese trading company)

"We place great importance on the British image of high quality; we do not want to destroy this image by buying cheap products from the UK we can get these from China. The spirit is important, British lifestyle, British heritage, British countryside, British High Society. There is no point in simply aiming for a low price; this will not be accepted by the Japanese. China and India are associated with low prices, not Britain".  
(Japanese manufacturer and importer)

Here we see how the imaginative geographies of Britishness go a considerable way in influencing the shape and form of British fashion exports to Japan. Indeed, with Anglo-Japanese exports - where geographical proximity, speed of response, as well as high freight costs and duties, pose substantial economic barriers - the power of these imaginative geographies form a crucial part of what are largely *culturally*-fuelled transactions brokered in terms of their cultural currency. Here, the mythologies of

Britishness inscribed onto fashion exports are prized over and above their basic 'value for money', the degree of a product's intrinsic Britishness - its 'sign-value' - being its major appeal. We see this point borne out in advice given by the BKCEC, where potential British fashion exporters are encouraged to niche market their products in order to target and to indulge the Japanese 'mind-set', one in which,

"quality and design are more important than price, high quality is a necessity in Japan, not a luxury.... It is important to take into account the Japanese 'mind-set'; certain products and images are associated with certain countries and British manufacturers should use this to their advantage."  
(Ledgerwood, 1997:9-13)

What we are seeing here, therefore, in this prizing and this 'playing up' of the *Britishness-of-British-fashion* is evidence of a wider project of consumer distinction. According to Action Japan literature the Japanese yearning for individualism and authenticity, combined with their formidable spending power, means that the 'Made in Britain' label is a valuable weapon in the consumer "search for the real thing...the young in particular want to be seen to be different" (*Fashion Focus*, 1997:2). Symbols of Britishness, in this case in the form of British fashion, are employed as markers of multi-culturalism and minority tastes, of a consumer prowess where the discerning and truly fashion conscious Japanese customer will go to great lengths in order to seek out a unique product or exotic product that will, in turn, enhance their style kudos (see also, for example, section 4.5.ii). Leading this pursuit of style and difference are the Japanese 'Long Hairs' (Davies, 1994), a colloquial term applied to a group of young, female, unmarried secretaries, who live with their parents and are known for their "economic clout" (Joseph, 1994:50), fickle tastes and obsessive following of the latest trends. The Long Hairs think nothing of having,

"ranges tailor-made in very small runs to get just the right shade or thickness of crêpe sole. They are very fashion conscious and do not want copies.... The trend towards speciality stores is also strong as an antidote to the 'one style for all' mentality".

*(Fashion Focus, 1997:3)*

In the Japanese market, then, we see 'ethnic' British clothing - Shetland jumpers and Fairisle knits, Harris tweeds and Blackwatch tartan - assuming great importance, being valued for their 'realness', their 'touristic quality' (Lash and Urry, 1994) and for fulfilling what has been described as a sartorial 'pilgrimage after authenticity' (Maynard, 1999). Encouraged to gaze upon and collect the signs of many cultures, trophy-hunting consumers view such vernacular British styles as symbols through which to reflect their own cosmopolitanism and cultural capital. As Samuel (1992: xxxi-xxxii) argues, "British-made clothes, like Harris tweeds or Shetland jumpers, seem increasingly to be prized for their 'ethnic' quality and to go for the most part to tourists". Thus we see how the Japanese desire for individualism is met, in part, through the adornment and display of different fashions from around the world. Furthermore the exploitation of this desire has been identified by the BKCEC as one of the key routes to British export success in Japan. The BKCEC advise that the poetic weaving of local British histories both onto and within fashion products gives a competitive edge in this market where retailers and consumers alike are eager to buy into, and to show off, their own slice of an idealised - and 'personalised' - British lifestyle. Potential exporters are advised that,

"Straight classics are not enough; there is no reason to import them from the UK, something special is needed. An old established British company with a history, can provide a package, a story behind the product (even if they have to use a bit of poetic licence!), in a way which can appeal to the Japanese buyer and lend itself to promotion to the consumer. The 'Real Shetland' knitwear is a good example of this approach. The Japanese are interested in British lifestyle...an idealised picture of the landed gentry."

*(Ledgerwood, 1995:29)*



*Figure 35: Traditional Weatherwear. One of the UK's leading fashion exporters to Japan. The featured image is taken from publicity for the 'British Fashion' trade fairs held in Osaka and Tokyo, 1997. These fairs were part of a UK trade mission to Japan jointly convened by the DTI and BKCEC under their 'Action Japan: Partnership for Profit' initiative.*

Certainly this lifestyling of fashion products via the narration of their Britishness is considered a key factor in conquering Japan, a tactic employed and endorsed, for example, by the company, Traditional Weatherwear (figure 35), one of the most successful British brands currently exporting to Japan and Scotland's only maker of genuine rubber mackintoshes (Sunderland, 2000:10). As the winner of the British Apparel Export Gold Award, 2000, Traditional Weatherwear has exported its products for more than a decade but saw sales treble over the last twelve months from £360,000 to over £1 million. This dramatic surge has been directly attributed to the company's

renewal of brand imagery in which their 'genuineness', told through the story of their 100 year corporate history and founder, Charles MacKintosh (the inventor of rubberised cotton who gave his name to the Mac) played a leading role. It was reported (*Fashion Focus*, 1997:3) that,

"Traditional Weatherwear, the Scottish manufacturer of handmade raincoats and outerwear is pouring on the sales in Japan, thanks to marketing its image and the selling strength of its rich history. Exports to Japan have shot up dramatically...so how do they do that? 'We have concentrated heavily on marketing the brand image, making it more of a collection for our customers to sell'". (*Fashion Focus*, 1997:3)

Again, then, we see here how the 'personalisation' and the recounting of life-histories are crucial strategies in securing Anglo-Japanese export success. These strategies tap into a consumer vogue for 'the real thing' and for a rooted sense of identity (refer to Robins' [1991: 38] "placed identities for placeless times", section 2.6) through the consumption of historical referencing and the commodification of the traditional 'family firm'.

#### **4.4 Crazy About the Bard, But Will They Buy New Britain?**

What then does the foregoing discussion tell us about UK fashion in Japan? Despite an ever-diversifying and innovative British apparel industry, it is classic, aspirational and designer-led British fashion that still continues to assume primacy over the Japanese imagination. The reasons behind this partial vision are not difficult to identify and seem to stem from within the confines of the British Isles itself. The domino effect of what we have already seen outlined (in chapter one) as a crumbling industry, plagued by lack of investment, held in low esteem and dogged by foreign competition has, in turn, meant little effort, time or money has been expended on any rigorous, positive or fully

comprehensive export promotion of a united British fashion industry with a depth of styling and professional approach to doing overseas business. Rather, only the largest and wealthiest of British fashion players - going it alone and interested in self-gain rather than the prosperity of the national industry - have fought the British export battle. Therefore, whilst the Japanese are fully *au fait* with American brands such as Donna Karan, Calvin Klein and Tommy Hilfiger<sup>13</sup> because of the vast sums the latter spend worldwide on advertising and promotion; whilst the Japanese know the French designer houses because of their large scale marketing and promotion of perfume and cosmetics; whilst the Japanese have an almost encyclopaedic knowledge of the Italians because they spend a great deal of money consolidating their presence in the Japanese market; when it comes to the British, the Japanese are only aware of major brands and know nothing about the British industry as a whole. As Ledgerwood (1997:12-14), explains,

"British manufacturers still have an image problem and I fear that nothing has changed since I wrote the 'British menswear in Japan' report a year and a half ago. Despite the fact that a large new Vivienne Westwood shop had recently opened in Tokyo; despite the fact that Paul Smith had recently been declared number one menswear designer in Japan; despite the fact that the new British look is to be seen everywhere, Britain was readily associated with tradition and not with fashion.... My visit to Japan was as much about telling the Japanese what the British have to offer as it was about investigating the Japanese market. The British apparel industry must be promoted more energetically if we are to counter this outdated image that the Japanese have of Britain.... It has been largely the better end companies, predominantly classic and traditional in styling, who have targeted the Japanese market...it is hardly surprising that many Japanese are left with the impression that this is all the British market has to offer. How can the Japanese know what goes on quietly behind the scenes when the British don't promote their own skills and capabilities?"  
(Ledgerwood,1997:12-16)

If the British fashion industry is serious about acquiring a footing on par with its European and American rivals, of updating its image and deepening its export profile, a far more organised and sustained campaign of promotion is required starting at the

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<sup>13</sup> In 1998, American designer Tommy Hilfiger spent \$15million-\$20million on the launch of his

grass-roots of the British-based industry and disseminating out. The seeds towards this initiative are slowly being sown, the Festival UK98 in Japan, for example, has foregrounded British street and clubwear as being the 'next big thing', hoping that the subcultural scene will help mobilise a reputation for Britain as an innovator of more radical and edgier styles. The British Tourist Authority (BTA) has also been influential in the Action Japan campaign, initiating and propagating a portrait of New Britain. The latest edition of its 'UK:The Guide' - a magazine aimed at young people in the BTA's overseas markets - employs the British fashion scene as one of its most powerful and effective tools with which to "alter perceptions of Britain...it moves away from the more traditional icons that are often used to promote Britain and features the nation's hottest dancefloors, football, fashion, pub bands and cult British TV" (BTA press release, February 1998).

Yet in spite of these gestures towards modernisation, the biggest issue in this discussion of 'Britishness' abroad remains unanswered: it is undeniable that Japan is "crazy about the Bard" and harbours a vision of Britain steeped in imperialist nostalgia. However the most compulsive - and as yet, imponderable - question is the one that lies behind this persistent image and that asks "will it also buy *New Britain*?" (Watts, 1998:10). In the section that follows, I look at how Mulberry and Paul Smith manage their exports within what we have seen here as the marginal sites of the Japanese fashion industry. I investigate the ways in which each company has negotiated the conflicting forces of change and continuity that currently characterise Anglo-Japanese exports and the extent to which their export strategies and overseas retail formulae have been successful. In particular I look at the different narratives employed by Mulberry and Paul Smith in

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womenswear range alone (Tredre, 1998b:14).



approaching the Japanese market, how 'going global' has seen both companies using their Britishness as a valuable tool to success *and*, perhaps most significantly of all, how this Britishness relates to far more than its straightforward transplantation onto a weak and passive foreign market (recall Mort [1996] and Massey's [1995a] rejection of 'lumpen consumers' and 'jingoistic' locales discussed in section 2.2, as well as the ever-lengthening commodity chain that sees consumers 're-writing' product meanings and lores). Over the remaining course of the chapter, therefore, we shall see how Mulberry and Paul Smith, to varying degrees and with varying levels of competence, go about scrambling the discourses of 'old' *and* 'new' Britain as part and parcel of their respective export programmes and how their exports are characterised by a range of narratives of ambiguity, that are at once steeped in imperialist nostalgia but that also display a remarkable flexibility towards the specialisations of the Japanese market.

#### **4.5 Exporting Britishness: Paul Smith and Mulberry in Japan**

With over four fifths of their respective turnover coming from Japan, both Mulberry and Paul Smith have a formidable presence in the Japanese market. Keen to profit from as wide a catchment as possible, both companies have pursued global business from their very earliest days, identifying the sheer strength of their association with Britain and Britishness as a core value in capturing the imaginations of foreign consumers and particularly the "growing number of Japanese anglophiles" (Watts, 1998:10). In going about their global business Paul Smith and Mulberry maximise their national affiliation, albeit in often very different ways, by selling a sense of British lifestyle through the inflection of their goods with (Anglo-)British traits, values and characteristics. As the marketing director at Mulberry argues,

"What I don't have a problem with is, is that I genuinely think a competitive difference for Mulberry is Englishness. It is an English brand. It's not Italian, it's not German, it's not Japanese, it is English and I think you should use that as a strength."

(Author's interview)

This sentiment is bolstered by Mulberry's export director, who further argues the importance of the company's British identity in serving the Japanese market, so that,

"We've got to keep our brand identity. We've got to work on keeping our Britishness, keeping our Mulberryness.... There will never be a Japanese Mulberry, there will be a Mulberry in Japan."

(Author's interview)

A similar view is also to be found when we turn to Paul Smith. Here, the company's understanding of the subtleties of global-local relations, again exhibited through the use of their Britishness, has been heralded as one of the key techniques in the company's overwhelming export success. It is argued that,

"Smith's real power is down to having his finger firmly on the pulse. A clear indication of this is his absolute commitment to a global marketplace (his biggest market is Japan, he shows in Paris). He thinks internationally, and uses his Britishness as a tool overseas."

(*Menswear*, 1999:3)

Britishness, then, forms the very kernel of the Paul Smith enterprise and whilst the business has expanded to become a truly global concern, the perception of the brand as a British entity has never faltered. As the renowned London bespoke tailor, Timothy Everest (quoted in Tucker, 1998:68) explains,

"Paul Smith is a great example of someone who has kept and retained a strong identity no matter where he locates his business: both shops and products are intrinsically British."

(Everest quoted in Tucker, 1998:64)

Mulberry's and Paul Smith's approach to the exporting of their products - and of their philosophies - displays a deep regard for local distinctiveness, as well as a comprehensive grasp of the differing traits and requirements to be found between markets. Despite their global dealings, both companies have retained a strong sense of national identity and both companies appreciate the value-adding factor that their Britishness brings them, especially, as we have already seen, in appealing to the preferences of the Japanese market. Here, I go on to explore these preferences by looking at some of the traits that are imagined (in the Japanese sphere of consumption) as being 'quintessentially British' and that are duly 'played up' by Mulberry and by Paul Smith. These revolve around three main themes: of the eccentric - and bonkers - British disposition; of the 'status-defining' nature of many of the top - 'true' - British brands, and of Britishness being equated with high standards and attentiveness to 'small detail'.

### **i British and bonkers**

In 'playing up' their Britishness when exporting to Japan, Mulberry and Paul Smith are similar in that they foreground several traits long viewed as hallmarks of British style. In particular, 'eccentricity' is a common thread exploited by both organisations as a clear reference to British fashion's enduring record in bohemian styling (de la Haye, 1996; McRobbie, 1998), individualism and a general abandonment of social convention (recall for example, the off-beat eccentricity of British design icons Vivienne Westwood, Zandra Rhodes, Alexander McQueen or the even earlier legacy of, say, Sir Cecil Beaton and his elaborate costumes for the stage and screen). As a result, the British have, according to Samuel (1992: xxxviii-xxxix), elevated "muddling through" to the status of an art and in sartorial terms have acquired a national disposition based on a quirkiness of styling and odd-ball charm. The projection of eccentricity by

Mulberry and Paul Smith therefore enables a sense of their 'being British', however, as we shall see in the following discussion, this same eccentricity, set in place to symbolise a decidedly national character, is mobilised by these two companies in quite differing ways and by using exceptionally different techniques and associations.

A 'discourse of eccentricity' pervades the length and breadth of the Mulberry corporate identity where the very spirit of Mulberryness is described as quirky, fearlessly individual and full to the brim with "British charm and whimsy" (Mulberry Home, 1991:13). According to the human resources director, Monty Saul (wife of Roger) this essence - "something that hovers between timelessness and bonkers" (quoted in Brogan, 1990: no pagination) - is a primary factor in the company's success abroad, where "Mulberry is taken more seriously" (Mulberry Home 1991:10). Indeed, Mulberry's distinctive *style anglais* is, I believe, produced first and foremost for export, its whimsical approach geared more to indulging overseas and touristic perceptions of Britishness rather than for the British themselves - as the ready-to-wear design director points out, "it's [Mulberry] still probably unheard of in many, many parts of England", (author's interview). Similarly the Mulberry founder and managing director, Roger Saul explains,

"I think our success was understanding Englishness from an international perspective, as opposed to understanding it from within England. So it was knowing how to present what the foreigner wanted out of Englishness". (Author's interview)

This somewhat bonkers Mulberry style is typified on the mannequins and models to be found 'in-house' where Mulberry's Prince of Wales check jackets are teamed with their pinstripe trousers and paisley accessories to create a mismatch that is unmistakably

British - witty, enduring and "held in esteem and affection throughout the world" (autumn/winter 1995 campaign). As the marketing director explains,

"there is this bohemian element. You know when I was in Tokyo opening a Mulberry store a month ago, this guy came in and he looked like Toad-of-Toad-Hall, this Japanese guy, and this was his expression of Englishness. And Mulberry, globally does personify a certain feeling of Englishness which is about tradition, craftsmanship, a slight eclectic feel, putting unusual things together which only the English would do, putting a tartan with a stripe. A slightly eccentric, and there is this feeling of eccentricity to Mulberry which people like that, you can get very traditional British brands like Barbour, you know its green and waxed and that's it. But Mulberry does tend to do things like take a Medieval print from home furnishings and put it next to a polka dot from London in the sixties...there is this bohemian, bohemianness."

(Author's interview)

Thus, unlike the sleek Italians, chic French or preppy Americans, the British look stereotypically emerges as eclectic and improvised, as a deeply individual style drawn from all manner of materials that come to hand. As Vogue (Shulman, 1997:74-86) recently argued in its 'Eye View', the Englishwoman is typified by actively bad dressing,

"brown woolly socks worn with stilettos...they will continue to affect the costume of timeless dowdiness, usually involving a blazer and a floral skirt, that may be seen on all occasions when Englishwomen have consciously dressed up."

(Shulman, 1997:74-86)

What is imagined as the quintessentially British art of off-beat dressing has therefore been adopted by Mulberry as a core value in its own corporate identity. In 1995, for example, Mulberry's advertising campaign promoted "The New Eccentrics" (Mulberry Life, Autumn/Winter1995) and featured a tailored range of unorthodox pattern combinations: Rupert Bear checks for women and tartan three-pieces for men (see figure 36). In 1996, meanwhile, we were invited to go "truly madly Mulberry"

Figure 36: Mulberry's 'New Eccentrics' Autumn/Winter 1995



(Mulberry Life Autumn/Winter 1996), to head for the hills and cavort in the countryside decked out in "something a little bit special...an amazingly embroidered fabric, or a fabulous chenille tweed" (ready-to-wear design director, author's interview). Whilst for its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary, Mulberry hosted a celebratory "clan gathering" inviting overseas buyers to a weekend of special events in the heart of the British countryside where they were entertained with "very British traditions" such as amateur theatricals and an English tea-party (Mulberry Life, Autumn/Winter 1995:3). All of these events and the products they help to promote are aides to Mulberry's creation of a traditional British lifestyle, a lifestyle denoted by eccentricity and that is tailored to supporting the mythologies of the fashion export market.

However, this determination to produce a British lifestyle with optimum appeal to the distinctive Japanese mind-set has also encountered several difficulties and Mulberry has been so preoccupied with this export project, that much of its recent ill-fortune (that we saw outlined in section 3.5) stems, I believe, from its own strength of dependency on overseas trade (D. Smith, 1998:6). With the over-strong pound triggering a loss of export earnings for Mulberry, their full-on ingratiating with overseas consumers has been at the expense of any serious cultivation of a domestic UK market where "you know, we often flatter ourselves by thinking that a lot more people know it than *do* know it...there's a huge amount of work we need to do in terms of brand recognition in our own country" (ready-to-wear design director, author's interview). Therefore, in focussing on its export profile, Mulberry has alienated itself from UK consumers and has left itself with few domestic supporters on whom to rely in times of crisis. Indeed most of Mulberry's UK-based sales go to souvenir-hunting visitors passing through the country from abroad and fewer and fewer of these tourists are keen to buy the company's £300 handbags. As Tredre (1998b: 14) proclaims, "British style is dead over here.... Only the elderly tourists appear to be buying the looks that once defined the British image.... Young Brits no longer covet the grand old names that gave a worldwide identity to British style. They want hip brands, typically from America and Italy". During 1998, for example, the company saw its UK sales to overseas visitors halve (*Daily Mail*, 1998; 1999). Meanwhile, in the Mulberry stronghold of Japan, the effects of recession under an 'Asian economic shadow' signal even further problems for the company. Here, Mulberry is bearing the brunt of a dramatic slow-down in Japanese consumer spending. Its heavy reliance on what is now the unstable economic market of Japan has pushed the company deeper and deeper into the red and in turn, suggests that

Mulberry's devotion to overseas exports is no longer such a prudent, nor such a lucrative, recipe for success.

With Paul Smith, however, this discourse of eccentricity has caused no such troubling encounters and the company is as well known 'at home' as it is abroad for its own inimitable style. Smith himself is surrounded by a corporate spin where the tastes and foibles of this "down-to-earth Nottingham lad"<sup>14</sup> (Billen, 1995:41) - with his collection of over 350 toy robots, his irreverent sense of fun and his penchant for producing absurd and incongruous props such as rubber chickens at board meetings - have come to be the very lynchpins of an organisation revolving around Smith's own charismatic personality. Corporate literature is quick to describe Smith's office as Santa's grotto overrun with tatty books, strewn cameras, antique jewellery and dismembered radios (Jones, 1995a), whilst Smith himself, always eager to wave the banner of British individualism, concedes, "I suppose my thing has always been about maximising Britishness" (Jones, 1995c:2). These idiosyncrasies are also to be found translated into the design ethic of Smith's products. His trademark 'jumble-sale English' (described in chapter three) is continually flaunted and his designs reflect an amalgam of influences drawn from all manner of cultural spheres - the floral suit (figure 37); the dinosaur printed lime green raincoat; the Doctor Who stripy scarf with forty-eight lurid colours; the Bedouin-inspired shirt from a visit to Cairo - are individual studies in eccentricity and underscore the Paul Smith cross between "Savile Row and Carnaby Street, the Eton schoolboy and the East End bad boy" (*The Face*, 1994:76).

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<sup>14</sup> The continual foregrounding of this notion of Smith as a humble northern lad provides an interesting commentary on class (see also chapter five). Smith's 'jumble-sale' English, his irreverent northern humour and his referencing from popular British culture all disrupt the





Figure 37: Floral Suit by Paul Smith - a study in eccentricity

Whilst we see Paul Smith relying on the long-established tradition of British eccentricity in order to sell his British lifestyle, what is particularly significant here is the way in which Smith re-works this traditional association in new and directional ways. For Paul Smith is almost revolutionary in refusing to serve up what he sees as an overworked and simplified image of British style consisting only of tailoring and tweeds. Bored by the sartorial clichés that dominate the export scene, Smith instead employs all manner of wildly differing styles in order to capture his sense of British quirkiness. He argues how,

"Everything has become so ghastly and corporate and false and full of faxes and high technology - there should be more room for fun! Eccentricity is part of being British, so why shouldn't it be part of the business world?" (Smith in Jones, 1995c:22)

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contention that export success in the Japanese market is reliant on aristocratic aspiration and the tapping of class pretension.

Paul Smith is particularly outspoken about all forms of such 'corporate ghastrliness'. Indeed he deems it an appalling cop-out for brands to be too export-dependent and to rely solely on exploiting those overseas consumers hungry for cosy nostalgia<sup>15</sup> and aspirational stylisations of Britishness - where it is promised that "you buy a polo shirt and you get a free stately home" (Billen 1995:42). Therefore, whilst many of his peers<sup>16</sup> are busy regurgitating Savile Row and country house tweeds as being the sum total of British fashion, Paul Smith is remarkable in that he acknowledges how "yes, we have a tremendous tradition of classic tailoring" but British fashion *also* encapsulates "punks and mods and street style and weird eccentrics" (Howarth, 1993: 46). What is seen on the Paul Smith catwalk, therefore, is the length and breadth of British style in all its complexity - an eccentric fusion of styles set to quite purposefully challenge the terms in which Britain is placed on the global fashion map. Paul Smith employs the traditional connection between British fashion and eccentricity to great effect, not merely to reproduce a tried and tested image of British quirkiness, but also to convey a real sense of the diversity of British fashion.

## ii True Brits?

The Japanese enthusiasm for branded merchandise is widely recognised (Davies, 1994; Joseph, 1994; Ledgerwood, 1995; 1997). In the past, "fake" brands, "brands for the sake of brands" (Ledgerwood, 1995:24) and those "top-notch snob-value labels" (Davies, 1994:8) have meant any English-worded logo or slogan (no matter how nonsensical) has been an instant best-seller. Joseph (1994:3), for example, documents how Japanese T-shirts "scrawled with snappy English slogans like 'Hi baby', 'Mother

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<sup>15</sup> Although it could be argued that Paul Smith does indeed project his own brand of nostalgia. His use of 'cult' icons (for example, Doctor Who and the Mini Cooper) are evocative of a Britain of a different era. PR rhetoric also flags up the story of Smith's 1950s suburban childhood and memories of a Britain - and Britishness - now lost.

Earth is crazy living', 'The time has come', 'Drink pitcher', 'Dandelion, let's catch a plane tomorrow forever sometime'" are much in evidence on the streets of Tokyo with younger Japanese consumers in particular being "easily led" (Davies, 1994:24) into buying anything remotely British as a means of affirming their own sense of status. Yet compared with ten years ago, the Japanese consumer is far more discerning and the bubble has burst on brand worship with fewer consumers being eager to get their hands on a designer label at all costs. Instead there is a greater valuing of the genuine article and the pursuit of authenticity is the latest consumer preoccupation to hit Japan (*Fashion Focus*, 1997; Ledgerwood, 1995; 1997).

With this in mind, Mulberry is again found facing a dilemma. Always keen to serve the Japanese market, Mulberry has emphasised its status as a genuinely British company, not merely being borne out of the British Isles but also asserting its traditional British production methods, British design cues and solid British values in order to underscore the Mulberry lifestyle as being 'the real thing'. These claims to authenticity are, however, increasingly vexed since Mulberry, as I have already documented (in chapter three), no longer manufactures all of its products exclusively within the UK. The 'Made in Britain' label - the very crux of Mulberry's sales pitch - is therefore fast becoming obsolete as Mulberry, in sourcing abroad, finds itself caught in "the trade off between the savings we're making on cost, compared to the perception of the brand" (marketing director, author's interview). Due to the constraints and dictates of cost effectiveness, then, we find Mulberry looking increasingly to overseas suppliers and each season, "on the grounds of price" (ready-to-wear design director, author's interview), sees the company shifting production from country to country. In recent years, for example,

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<sup>16</sup>We can surmise, I think, that Paul Smith would place Mulberry in this category.

many of Mulberry's leather products have been sourced from Turkey, Spain and Italy, whilst Mulberry's men's tailoring, along with selected pieces from its womenswear collection, is Italian.

What we are seeing here in Mulberry's 'trade off' between the balance sheet and brand identity is a symptom of the wider incapacities of the British fashion industry at large. As I have already discussed (in chapter one), British manufacturing is fraught with difficulties and is characterised by a reluctance to cast off the legacy of Fordism and to adapt to the modern demands of flexibility (Crewe & Davenport, 1992; Phizacklea, 1990; Purvis, 1996). This reluctance has in turn impacted most profoundly on the likes of Mulberry and those other brands that similarly trade on their exclusivity, high quality and unusual designs and fabrics. For Mulberry has made its name in exacting standards and a quirkiness that is only attainable through small batches and with highly skilled production runs - distinctive qualities that require a level of flexibility only to be found in the versatile and specialised work practises of overseas manufacturers in continental Europe. Therefore in order to achieve its British look, we see how Mulberry has been forced, in many instances, to source abroad for suitable manufacturing packages where financial viability comes hand in hand with an appreciation of Mulberry's ideological qualities. Put simply, the British manufacturing industry, plagued by dubious quality controls, mass-productionitis and poor design, is unable to offer Mulberry the levels of flexibility and specialisation that it, as an exclusive and designer-oriented company, demands.

What is fascinating is the way in which Mulberry has reacted to these concerns over authenticity and the degree to which the loss of its 'Made in Britain' label has affected

its sense of 'being British'. In marketing its way around this problem, Mulberry is keen to reassure its customers that the essence of their products has changed very little and that despite being assembled outside of the UK, Mulberry products still bear all the hallmarks of a fully fledged British ancestry. As the marketing director explains,

"[Mulberry has] this problem at the brand level where the consumers are saying 'but I thought if I buy Mulberry...[it is] made in Britain, that's why I pay the money that I do'. But economically it does not make sense.... So how can you market your way around it? Quite simply from a marketing point of view if 'Made in England' is no longer an option, then, for example, one of the things we can do is build a guarantee programme where we are almost saying to the consumer, 'look, although we may not manufacture in the UK, we still will give you an absolute guarantee'...so what you're doing to the consumer is shifting their concerns from one thing onto the pluses".

(Author's interview)

This notion of guarantee tells us that despite its globalising production base, Mulberry is still eager to assert the connection between its products and their Britishness. In so doing, we find that Mulberry is also engaged in the process of double commodity fetishism that I described earlier in the chapter. For in playing up the British essence of their products the company is simultaneously involved in channelling its consumer focus away from what Sack (1992) suggests is the undesirable backstage history of production, a history that goes against the grain of the established Mulberry identity and that is therefore "virtually obliterated" in the final presentation of these products to the consuming public (Sack, 1992:118). In spite of their obligation to overseas sourcing, then, we see that Mulberry is steadfast in manifesting the Britishness of its clothing and accessories and although there seems to be a hidden geography of production lying heavily masked underneath a marketing veneer, this does little to detract from Mulberry's insistence that it is a British brand (Lee, 1993; Shields, 1992). As Skoggard (1998:58) argues, "the successful marketing of fashion lies in divorcing the product

from any referent to its actual production". Therefore, whilst Mulberry "has had to look further afield" in manufacturing terms (ready-to-wear design director), when it comes to selling its lifestyle, Mulberry's company ideology, values and mission statement remain immovably British. As the ready-to-wear design director argues,

"it would be lovely if for a label like Mulberry every single thing we produced could say 'Made in Britain', it would be much nicer...but it's obviously all designed in England, so you know, it's still very much designed and developed here.... We can't just put our heads in the sand and say, 'well it doesn't matter if you can get a cotton T-shirt for this price from wherever, we'll continue to buy one in England', because providing we have the design control, the quality control, they're making the product we want, it's only sensible to source the product where you can get the best price for that product". (Author's interview)

From this it is possible to see how Mulberry goes about defining the British nature of its products but what is especially fascinating is the way in which Mulberry achieves this through much more than just clever marketing. For we see here that, in their stringent design and quality controls, Mulberry maintains a tight rein on the actual Britishness of the production process - albeit often located in a different country - and that, no matter what the location, the technologies surrounding their products reflect inherently British values. Production standards are enforced, for example, via Mulberry's policy where stitchers are required to complete work on say, a handbag, from beginning to end (known as the process of 'making through'). In this way, the percentage of sloppy output is dramatically reduced since repetitive tasks are kept to a minimum in order to avoid a 'production-line mentality' where boredom and hastiness compromises quality and attention to detail. This policy also means that stitchers are required to be highly, and flexibly, skilled and able to perform a number of tasks from pattern assembly through to more intricate finishing. In a similar way, Mulberry's leather cutters are likewise highly skilled and are prided by the company for their ability "to work *with* the

hides" (factory worker, author's interview), bringing out their natural colourings, textures and patterns in keeping with Mulberry's corporate philosophy on a simplicity of style and the valuing of nature and naturalness. Indeed many of the cutters are derisive of Mulberry's rivals and argue that other élite leather goods companies, intent on dying their hides in gaudy up-to-the-minute colours, or in grinding out what Mulberry regards as the characterful scratches and abrasions that appear naturally on raw leather, fail to appreciate the charms and uniqueness to be found in a truly individual and hand-produced piece.

Therefore, via these production techniques and their reflection of characteristics elected as being British it is possible, firstly, to see how national values are not just to be found in Mulberry's marketing rhetoric but how they are also to be found permeating the length and breadth of the commodity chain. Secondly, it is also possible to see how these same production techniques, inextricably intertwined with the national values of high quality, longevity, tradition and excellence, come to form a foremost discourse in the promotion and export of Mulberry products. As the following excerpts from recent print advertising show, Mulberry's "lovingly hand crafted" products reflect a "quality of workmanship" (Mulberry advertising) that again indulge the mythologies of the fashion export market - enabling a sense of authenticity and as we see here engendering the values of an older national landscape.

"Mulberry Travelbags.

For those who consider traditional English leather to be the only way to travel.

Crafted in the time-honoured way, Mulberry Scotchgrain<sup>17</sup> is the perfect travelling companion. Highly durable yet classical in design with its distinctive pebble grain

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<sup>17</sup> Scotchgrain is the name of a specific material developed by Mulberry for use in their luggage and accessories. A corporate brochure explains: "created for the most demanding of owners, this classic Mulberry material offers the rare combination of lightweight durability and water resistance, making it ideal for the rigours of daily life. The robust outer layer is finished with a

print, the quality of workmanship proves that even today the old values still hold true."  
(Mulberry accessories advert)

"Can you tell the difference between enduring style and a passing fad?

Of course you can.

Moss Grain.

The soft suede finish in hues of the highlands is both practical and beautiful. Each item lovingly hand crafted to be treasured forever. Without once going out of style."

(Mulberry accessories advert)

It is through such advertising rhetoric that Mulberry underscores its innate Britishness and the idea that buying Mulberry is indeed buying a little piece of Britain. This Britain, however, is couched in traditional and backward-looking terms and references, of craft production, skilled labour, rustic landscapes and a sedate way-of-life. Yet when we turn to the case of Paul Smith, whilst it is again possible to see how this fostering of authenticity assumes a key importance in the company's export strategy, it is also possible to see how this authenticity is engendered through very different narratives than those used by Mulberry, namely ones of juxtaposition, of satire and of innovation.

The most obvious grounding of Paul Smith's innate Britishness is via Smith himself and most notably via the 'True Brit' phenomenon with which he has become so heavily associated. The True Brit catchphrase was first coined by the organisation in October 1995 when the Paul Smith exhibition was launched with a flurry of publicity at the Design Museum, London to celebrate Smith's quarter-of-a-century in the fashion business. The use of the True Brit slogan is presumably intended as a witty take on the title of John Wayne's celebrated film, 'True Grit', and supplies a taste of Smith's own satirical sense of humour with his telling adoption of what is a macho and reactionary plot.

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distinctive embossed pebble grain finish, while each handbag and accessory is lined with



The acclaimed True Brit exhibition sets about detailing not purely an organisational history but also offers an insight into the background and continuing rise of the man-behind-the-label. The exhibition is not merely a static archive of Smith's life and times but again reflects his own personal philosophy, offering a fun, interactive experience and unusual and innovative modes of presentation. For example, the exhibition includes a conveyor belt spanning thirty-two feet and featuring Lego models that sequentially illustrate each stage in the creation of a Paul Smith garment. Home-produced video films see Paul taking us on unscripted tours of his favourite boyhood haunts or offering informal explanations into the design and workings of his flagship store. Interactive videos also give visitors to the exhibition a chance to select private viewings of Smith's recent catwalk collections, each with an introduction by Paul as well as his own verdict on the success and performance of the featured designs. We can view the exhibition through binoculars that dangle from the rafters, feel the fabrics used in his latest collections or inspect the exhibition catalogue that comes in the form of a traditional black and white newspaper. The emphasis is on a deeply personal approach, from the voice-recorded greeting that is activated upon entering the exhibition, through to the anecdotal accounts of Smith as a cycle-mad teenager together with other personal paraphernalia such as his school reports and holiday snaps. Candid and unpretentious, the intimacy of the exhibition serves to bolster Paul Smith's own crusade against the blandness and placelessness of many of his designer and globally expansive peers. In foregrounding his own story and in 'playing up' his Nottingham roots Paul Smith is keen to underscore his status as a *true* Brit with a place-specific identity. For "real-ness", it is argued, is defined by residence in any one place and the internalisation of "subjective dispositions" that this brings (McCrone, 1998:42; Smout, 1994). The fact that Paul

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Mulberry check".

Smith's allegiance to Britain is bolstered by his living there, made even better by his longstanding family connections to a specific British city, is therefore a powerful device in demonstrating the company's authenticity to its international followers.

Following its debut in London during 1995, the 'Paul Smith: True Brit' exhibition was shipped to Japan as a centrepiece for the Festival UK98 (details of which appear earlier on in this chapter). What is interesting however is the way in which this exhibition was specially modified for its tour of Japan, being substantially expanded in order to tap directly into the peculiarities of the locale. The tailor-made additions for the Japanese leg of the exhibition reveal just how sensitised Paul Smith has become to the preferences of different cultures and how Smith's global project is finely tuned to the demands of different cultural groupings. As well as the addition of a 'Famous People' gallery featuring well-known Japanese individuals decked out in Paul Smith garb, another inclusion to tempt the Japanese mind-set was a custom made 'artcar' - a Mini sprayed in stripy citrus colours mirroring the Paul Smith Summer 1997 collections and set to serve the Japanese obsession with the miniature as well as the Japanese adoration of 'Mr Bean', an infamous Mini owner and British television's most popular export of recent years.

When it comes to the Japanese market, then, Paul Smith invests a great deal in foregrounding both himself, and by default, his products, as being truly British. Yet this discourse of authenticity is also to be found in many other aspects of the corporate identity. Smith relies heavily on historical and traditional signposts in order to forge nostalgic connections to the older Britain that we have seen dominating the imaginative geographies of fashion exports. In particular these nostalgic references are apparent in

the design aesthetic of Paul Smith's overseas retail outlets where he goes to tremendous lengths to ensure the authenticity of his shop interiors. Indeed Nixon (1997:172) argues that Smith was the first contemporary designer to realise the importance of the 'design vocabularies' of fashion outlets, "the coding of shop space [bringing] to bear specific cultural values and meanings on the garment designs". Throughout the world Paul Smith's stores are replicas of his shops in the UK and are fitted out in the style of a traditional English gentleman's dressing-room or tailors from the 1950s (figure 38).

*Figure 38: Paul Smith store interior, Floral Street, Covent Garden, London. Throughout the world, Smith's stores are replicas of his shops in the UK with mahogany fittings, floorboarding and glass cabinets constructing a 'design vocabulary' based on notions of authenticity, intimacy and the personal.*



Mahogany fittings, floorboarding, glass cabinets and entire wooden interiors have been shipped from Britain to Japan. The Kobe shop, for example, was originally a chemist's dispensary in Sheffield and the Tokyo shop a confectioner's in Newcastle.

What we are seeing here in these great efforts towards authenticity is once again referent to Smith's own personal campaign against what is cast as the uniformity and dullness of big business. In 'going global' Smith, it would seem, is determined to retain his British identity. His intrinsic uniqueness he sees as a direct countermeasure to the homogeneity, artificiality and blandness frequently attributed to global expansion and many logo-oriented and ubiquitous fashion labels. To this end, Smith insists that each of his shops around the world has to have a heart, arguing (in Tucker, 1998:64) that "I hate the fact that shops are either museums or boxes, I like the smell of polish and the feeling that somebody cares"<sup>18</sup>. Miller (1987: 136) describes Paul Smith outlets, regardless of location, as being,

"little oases of English eccentricity, invariably fitted out with mahogany counters, display cabinets, shelves and oak flooring stripped from redundant premises around Britain. He even imported a 100 year old floor for one of his Tokyo stores."  
(Miller, 1987: 136)

The emerging narrative that we see here may therefore be described as one of imperialist nostalgia with Paul Smith using the accoutrements of a by-gone age as a means of colonising the Japanese market. Smith's highly visible presence in Japan relies on the use of such traditional design cues and typically British fixtures and

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<sup>18</sup> The 'smell of polish' that Smith refers to here is very much the smell of a museum. Also cf. the industrial heritage sites of the 1950s (eg. Beamish and Ironbridge), where shops from different localities were brought *together* from around the UK in a project of historical authenticity and Smith's own 'True Brit' project, part of which involves, as we see here, the dissemination of similar olde world corner shops *out* of the UK to scattered locations.

fittings, many of which are historical imports. The "stuff...lets you know you're in a Paul Smith shop, not just some tacky olde English emporium in Regent Street where they put tartan in the window and sell marmalade at the tills" (Garfield, 1990:4). However, as we have come to expect, Paul Smith's mobilisation of this traditional design vocabulary is far from straightforward. Rather than the simple appropriation of references to British heritage, of gentlemanly values and age-old tailoring, the design aesthetic of Smith's stores is more complex, hinting at a sense of ambiguity and juxtaposition in order to mix the signs of Britain-past with modern, and indeed, avant-garde snapshots of Britishness. Amidst the traditional grandeur of these heavy wood interiors, with their woven rugs and classic antiques are a range of incongruous fixtures, including not only cult British memorabilia such as turn-of-the-century decorative shell boxes, selections of 1920s oil paintings and contemporary *objets d'art* by young British designers but also personal gadgetry such as train sets, Dinky cars and water pistols that provide a distinctive atmosphere of "homely retail anarchy" (Jones, 1995a:16).

Smith's retail outlets are therefore characterised by a deliberately contrasting set of aesthetics. There are clear references to traditional notions of elegance and Britishness, underscored by reverential discourses about quality and timelessness that hark back to a particular re-imagined Edwardian past (Nixon, 1996). Yet at the same time another set of cultural vocabularies is superimposed on top of this aesthetic of traditionalism, namely notions of irony, of kitsch and of the surreal (Crewe and Goodrum, forthcoming). It is in this scrambling of traditional and modern symbols, and of classic and contemporary artefacts that Paul Smith's export initiatives are remarkable. For whilst so many of Smith's British contemporaries are content with peddling only the romanticised tropes of an older imperial past, Paul Smith fuses traditional and modern

influences. He goes about authenticating his own vision of British fashion via the exceptionally innovative routes of juxtaposition and diversity - of "posh mixed with kitsch, matt black with tat" (Jones, 1995c:3). It is also in this mixing of signs and symbols from Britain (and Britishness) past and Britain (and Britishness) present that Smith goes some way in mobilising Massey's (1994) assertion of a 'progressive sense of place' (refer back to section 2.6), one that relies less on delving into Britain's past for a sense of being, and more on constructing hybrid versions of Britain and Britishness.

### **iii Big business, small detail**

McVeigh (1997) suggests that there is something Foucauldian in the salience of uniforms in everyday Japan. That Japan's manifold codes of regulated dress, evident from the classroom to the executive office points to a national concern with "wearing ideology" (1997:189) and the linkages that are to be made between material culture and the disciplining of minds and bodies. Clammer (1992) also describes the Japanese preoccupation with personal appearance management and the emphasis that is placed upon having the 'correct' appearance and the importance of wearing the 'right' clothes. For as Ledgerwood (1995:21) explains,

"In Japan, appearance is often more important than comfort, whereas in the UK and America more attention is paid to comfort. Presentation is always of the utmost importance in Japan...stitching and finish should be of an exceptionally high standard. Pockets and buttonholes must be visibly reinforced, buttons must be stitched on in a particular way and so on."  
(Ledgerwood, 1995:21)

As we have already seen over the course of the chapter, the Japanese market is particularly demanding when it comes to quality and has high expectations of imported European fashion where attention to detail, the most luxurious of fabrics and trimmings,

and the highest standards of fit and cut must be carefully observed. Mulberry is a company that excels in meeting the exacting demands of the Japanese consumer and the company's uncompromising dedication to quality in part explains its record of popularity in Japan. In bearing the hallmarks of British lifestyle, the Mulberry brand name appeals to the Japanese consumer in their search for material markers of taste and sophistication (Clammer, 1992).

Mulberry goes to great lengths to reinforce the innate 'specialness' of its products and via what may be termed as carefully controlled techniques of 'enchantment' the company builds up a mystique and cachet around its commodities as a means of enhancing not just their economic but also their cultural value. For example, Mulberry's immaculately laundered and ironed garments of impeccable quality leave the store in elegant packaging and there are strict corporate guidelines on the folding and wrapping of individual items at the point of sale. Handbags for instance even leave the factory production line under a pre-determined code where the exact number of watermarked sheets of tissue are identically pleated for stuffing and packing. Bags are checked for quality at least five times before they reach the warehouse including a check at the leather supplier, on arrival at Mulberry and at various stages during the cutting and assembly process. Styles are then again randomly checked in the warehouse to ensure a high standard of finish and correct packing. Meanwhile, the Mulberry 'Roger's briefcase' takes 24 minutes to cut, 160 minutes to assemble, involves 10 square feet of leather, 13 components and has 19 assembly operations. Their 'Large Despatch bag' takes 14 minutes to cut, 58 minutes to assemble, has 3 square feet of leather, 13 components and 16 assembly operations<sup>19</sup>. All these measures are about the creation of

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<sup>19</sup> It is here that we see a somewhat surprising 'time and motion' element to Mulberry's techniques of craft production. However, the company seem to quote these statistics as merely

an aura of specialness whereby the finest of details and most painstaking of methods infuse Mulberry products with a special aura of quality and exclusivity and where this same aura forms a clear contrast to mass market production values in which quantity, speed and scrimping is everything.

This uncompromising attention to detail is also to be found as a foremost discourse in Mulberry's promotional literature. The company is keen to 'play up' its painstaking standards in order to raise its appeal to the likes of the Japanese market where standards of clothing design, production and display are impeccable. The company's PR editorial boasts for example how,

"Mulberry is proud to be a guardian of time-honoured techniques and skills of leather crafting which are increasingly rare in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. These special skills date back through generations of craftsmen; they are painstaking and, by today's standards, highly labour intensive. One fine example of this labour of love is the gentlemen's hand-made Sedgemoor brogue, which contains an incredible 1,300 individual stitches and 436 brogued indentations. Like all Mulberry gentlemen's shoes, it is 'Goodyear Welted' for strength, insulation and durability. This is a process whereby the welt, (a strong band of leather which forms the connection between the insole, upper and outer sole) is double stitched into the sole." (Mulberry Life, 1990/91:4)

In many ways therefore Mulberry appears to have been extremely successful in ministering to the Japanese fascination with standards of regulated appearance. However, whilst being extremely attentive to the esoteric demands of the Japanese market in some ways, in others, we find that Mulberry has invested very little, leaving its Japanese employees and associates, for example, to their own devices and generally displaying a questionable commitment to the 'hands-on' mechanics of actively 'doing

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another means through which to impress their painstaking production process. This 'time and motion' study also reminds us that Mulberry is primarily a commercial enterprise and therefore, like any other profitable business, has to have some sort of regulation over output and productivity.



their business' in Japan. Mulberry fails to keep a finger firmly on the pulse of its day-to-day running. For example, Mulberry team visits to Japan take place only on a sporadic basis. It seems therefore that an immense conceptual as well as geographical distance has come to lie between the company's cloistered central offices and its far-flung export operations. The company, for example, "doesn't quite approve" (export director, author's interview) of some of its Japan-generated PR; there is also a reported paucity of communication between Mulberry and its export franchisees; out-of-date, old and obsolete marketing is still to be found 'doing the rounds', and Japanese advertising images often feature discontinued Mulberry stock. In several ways therefore Mulberry's export practises suffer from an impersonal approach, from a deficiency in practical managerial involvement and supervision 'in the field' and a general de-humanising of its Anglo-Japanese relations. A substantial fracture has opened up in the company, one where Mulberry is found to be lacking control in the way it carries out its business in Japan and where, as a result, this business is disorganised, ungainly and often deeply inefficient. The export director, for example, confesses that,

"the shops in Japan don't always look like Mulberry shops should...I teach them how to merchandise and how you would put bags on the shelf and how many bags you would put out and what material and what colours goes with what area...but the minute I'm gone they do anything. They see the Mulberry people to the airport and then they think they're safe and they go back and change everything." (Author's interview)

Mulberry's nonchalance with regard to the managing of its Japanese franchises has meant that there are blatant weaknesses in what should be a very close working relationship.

When we turn to Paul Smith's export activities a quite different style of management is evident with Paul himself enjoying an exceptionally close relationship with the Japanese trading house Itochu, which still manufactures, wholesales and retails Paul Smith and R. Newbold across Japan. Smith personally visits Japan at least twice a year, without fail. This, he says, is one of the key reasons behind his success there. His extraordinary following in Japan has not been an overnight phenomenon. Rather Paul has had to work hard at getting to know the people, the market, the business, the culture (Blanchard, 1999b:41). Paul Smith argues,

"I often talk at business conferences and one of the first things I'm always asked is how do you break into a lucrative market like Japan? You can almost see them dribbling at the prospect. But it's not about breaking into a market. It's about building relationships.... A lot of designers like Lauren, Armani, Gianfranco Ferre have got licence agreements but they've either never been there or have been there once, travelling from their hotel for a sort of waving ceremony. The difference is that we really work at it." (Smith in Crewe and Goodrum: forthcoming)

From this it is clear how Smith's phenomenal achievements in Japan relate not simply to just a clever packaging of a particular version of traditional Britishness. Rather, his success can be attributed to, a tremendous amount of 'to-ing and fro-ing'; a constant and direct dialogue with his overseas shops and franchises, and to a detailed personal knowledge of the cultures, customs, consumers and systems of economic organisation at work there. Smith, for example, makes it a personal priority to understand and develop his export business. He ensures that all of his offices are located above the shops in which his clothes are sold. He is frequently to be found serving behind the counter in his Floral Street shop in London or advising his customers on tailoring and accessories. In this way, Smith very much models himself on the traditional shopkeeper, celebrating a golden age of retailing before the arrival of the mass market giants and thereby

ensuring that, no matter how big his ever-expanding business becomes, it still retains a 'personal touch'. Indeed Smith's own very approachability is his credo and he argues,

"I'm unlike other designers, many of whom work in rarefied studios and never get to meet the people who pay their wages. I have three floors in a very busy shop and I visit it every day. When you work in a commercial milieu you have to have one foot in reality."  
(Smith in Tucker, 1998: 64)

This hands-on style of management is to be found across the entire reach of Paul Smith's worldwide fashion empire with his globalisation strategy, for example, exhibiting a remarkable awareness of local variations that are used to great effect. Smith displays a strong ability to seek out the right local conditions in order to maximise competitiveness and uses local specialisms to his advantage, be it printed fabrics from Como, linens and wools from Florence, mohair from West Yorkshire or retro memorabilia from 1960s London (Crewe and Goodrum, forthcoming). In many ways, then, Paul Smith uses the global division of specialisation not for conventional cost-reduction reasons (unlike, for example, Mulberry who we saw was forced, on financial grounds, to look to the Continent for suppliers and manufacturing) but in order to tap into local pools of excellence on a global basis. The company's ability to penetrate the Japanese market is therefore firmly rooted in Smith's craft of fashion - in his tailoring skills, fabric selection and attention to detail, values that, as Jones testifies, (1995c:11) are now firmly stamped across the length and breadth of the entire corporate identity,

"from the keyholes on his shop doors, to the buttons on his boxer shorts. He has expanded with caution, and every new area, each new franchise is researched with enormous care."  
(Jones, 1995c:11).

This meticulous research into the traits of individual markets yet again goes to show how Paul Smith's global initiative is very much a locally sensitised encounter characterised by hard work and attention to fine detailing. Such an approach is exemplified in Smith's most recent innovation involving a new denim range called 'Red Ear', the outcome of Paul's own forty-five fact-finding missions made to Japan. This latest collection has been developed specifically for the company's Japanese market, the inspiration for Red Ear stemming from the Paul Smith pursuit of longevity and quality together with the Japanese obsession with detail and excellence. Red Ear jeans, for example, are manufactured from the highest quality denim and rely on the highest standards of dyeing and weaving, on precision cutting and the most scrupulous assembly processes including immaculate finishing techniques with custom rivets, studs and stitching. It is such niche marketing and the careful targeting of select consumer audiences with the 'right' product that in part explains Paul Smith's formidable rise as the number one selling men's brand name in Japan.

Indeed, it is in both Paul Smith and Mulberry's fine finishing, exacting standards of presentation and other such attention to detail that we see here how, to varying degrees (and with varying levels of success), they both feed into and fuel a particular Japanese disposition. This illustrates that whilst both companies are large global concerns, they also display a sensitivity towards the differences and preferences between local markets. More broadly still, this further illustrates how the globalisation of (British) fashion does not necessarily equate to a straightforward - and what often has been deemed sinister - project of cultural homogenisation. For as I discussed in section 2.2, rather than merely being about standardisation, about the erosion of diversity and about the attendant withering of the nation (see also section 3.1), the processes of globalisation are far more

nuanced. As the export practices of Mulberry and Paul Smith both go to show, globalisation is a locally embedded encounter, one in which an awareness of both the 'locality' these companies are exporting from (i.e. Britain) and the 'locality' they are exporting to (i.e. Japan) are still relevant, if not crucial, differentials in the (post)modern marketplace.

Over the course of this chapter I have discussed how the export of British fashion also involves what is the contentious task of the export - and representation - of *Britishness*. Historically and commercially, we have seen how the words 'Britain' and 'Britishness' have come to be charged with a number of ideological and connotational codes. In particular, these codes have precipitated a predominantly nostalgic image of Britain and the British lifestyle, one entrenched in an imperial past where Britain is seen as standing for quality, eccentricity and excellence. As I go on to discuss in the following chapter, this same nostalgia also carries - and propagates - distinctive discourses on class, with the archetypal British citizen being identified through a specific class-related 'dress way', namely that of the aristocratic county-set and of the country gent in particular. Therefore, as the British are imagined as being 'all togged up for the country' and dressed for a privileged way of life hinting at huntin', shootin' and fishin', chapter five looks at, and problematises, what we have already seen as being the 'aura of snobbishness' that surrounds British identity. Doubtless the legacy of imperialism and its hidebound values remain as key points of reference in the geographical imaginings of Britishness. However - and as we have seen over the course of my discussion in this chapter - when we scratch beneath the surface of this dominant narrative a far more complex series of images, processes and strategies are at work, ones that simultaneously both confirm *and* disrupt the popular - but somewhat oversimplified - perception of

British style as traditional, classic and conservative. In the following chapter I therefore turn to look at the élitism of British fashion in more detail and suggest that British fashion is about far more than a look based only on class pretension and a wealthy select. Rather as increasing emphasis is placed on the consumption of difference and diversity, the clear class hierarchy that has characterised perceptions of British identity and British style is, as we have seen here, becoming confused, questioned and questionable.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Chic Versus Geek: Locating nation, locating taste

#### 5.1 Unfinished Business: Changing times, changing tastes

Deliberate imperfections in clothing - shredded fabrics, frayed edging, holes and ladders signal that a 'trash aesthetic' has gained new momentum<sup>20</sup> on the turn-of-the-century style circuit and that "kitsch has been brought in from the cold" (Bennun, 1998:4). This chapter examines how this stylistic vogue for kitsch and for trash impacts on British fashion and the quintessentially British aristocratic look based on huntin', shootin' and fishin'. For in my preceding discussion (in chapter four in particular) we have seen how Britishness is defined sartorially through connotational codes to do with high quality, fine finishing, exacting standards and high monetary value, and how class aspiration is promoted as a key 'value-adding' characteristic in the selling of British fashion and in British fashion exports. However, with the emergence of new "taste communities" (Mort, 1996:11); a valorising of the low-brow (recall for example Hemingway's 'true mothers' of cool as those dressed from the Cats Protection League charity shop, section 2.4), as well as an accompanying realignment in the "social terrain of taste" (Sconce, 1995: 373), conventional class-based characterisations and explanations of (British) fashion can be seen, in the face of these "changing geographies of consumption", as oversimplifications and increasingly subject to question (Jackson, 1995: 1875).

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<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Winwood, 1998a and 1998b or the autumn/winter 1998-9 collections of Margiela, Demeulemeester, Bet, Lang or van Noten. Note however, that this latest stylistic tendency towards slashing and shredding is by no means an entirely novel concept. I have already discussed (section 1.1) punk's aggressive ripping of everything from fishnet tights to slogan T-shirts during the late 1970s. The 1980s also saw a vogue for slashed Levi's (inspired by the iconic eighties pop group, Bros) as a means of showing off one's (fake) tan underneath one's heavily logo-ed clothing. Far further back in history, too, vain members of the aristocracy in Tudor times slashed their ostentatious heavy brocade and velvet outer clothing to show off the sumptuous linings underneath (Laver, 1996 [1969]; O'Hara Callan, 1998; Winwood, 1998a).

Developing the contentions of previous chapters, the following discussion looks at the 'aura of snobbishness' that has played such an axial part in commodified visions of British identity and in the construction of a national style that we have seen as promoting the signs and symbols of a sovereign state with its clear class hierarchy. It suggests, however, that as difference and diversity have come to be the watch-words of the contemporary marketplace, fashion seems to be driven far less by this conventional display of class distinction (refer to Simmel's and Veblen's theories of 'class fashion', section 2.7) and instead hinges more around a form of cultural and stylistic expertise that criss-crosses class divisions and that Thornton (1997:203) terms as "being in the know". The chapter explores this knowingness exhibited by emerging alternative taste communities. In so doing it then goes on to examine the significance of various geographical sites both in the creation of these communities and in an evolving sense of British style. This chapter emphasises how straightforward identifications of the national style landscape with rigid and class-specific meanings - with the crinolines and country clothing that we have seen as dominating perceptions of British style - are no longer so appropriate. Therefore as the somewhat false dichotomy between that which is 'chic' and 'geek' becomes evermore difficult to sustain (think back to Chanel's 'poor look', section 2.7, or to Berardi's 'heroin chic' and his mixing of so-called 'high' and 'low' cultural references, section 2.8) the resulting fluidity between, and smudging of, imposed class structures signals a disruption of the élitist 'trickle-down' theory that has been a feature of global imaginings of British fashion for so long.

I continue here, however, by first developing the more generic debate on globalisation and mass culture that I introduced in chapter two (section 2.2). We have already seen how globalisation has often been perceived as a sinister and threatening presence and



couched in terms of homogenisation. Here I provide a brief note on how this contention also had a specific - and nationalised - class-related discourse. For the stability of the British class system, and the way it bestowed aesthetic superiority onto the privileged upper classes, was perceived as being under threat from the 'schlock' and 'vulgarity' of mass culture and popular imports from the 'New World' and from the United States in particular.

## **5.2 Schlock of the New: Élitist Britain versus affordable America**

During the post-war years, industrialisation, the automation of manufacturing processes and the arrival of mass manufacturing and popular culture were particularly marked in Britain (Cardiff, 1980; Hebdige, 1988; Hoggart, 1957). Here, the 'spectre of Americanisation' was couched in distinctly class-related terms with aristocratic good taste being threatened by a "levelling down process" (Hedige, 1988:47; Partington, 1992) that, it was feared, would erode fundamental British values to do with morality, standards, as well as the boundaries between social class. Presiding notions of 'taste' and 'quality', as dictated by a cultural and economic élite, were consistently pitted against bland commercial imports (Chambers, 1984). The upper echelons of British society attacked what they saw as the vulgarity of this emerging popular taste - of "bijou-baronial decoration", of "the Tudoristic bungalow" - and "its tangible elimination of value and distinction" (Hebdige, 1988: 62-67). In many ways, then, British style has been about the expression, and dogged protection, of class status - of the 'haves' and 'have nots' - in which references to "traditional upper class activity such as hunting, shooting, fishing and horseriding" (Franklin, 1997: written correspondence) have been employed as foremost symbols of a national hierarchy based on the taste and value-systems of a wealthy select. Holt (1989), for example, argues that the 'flight from the

city' has always been part of an older middle-class tradition in which access to the countryside was very much a class privilege. 'Playing the game' was also considered as an exercise in the art of being 'British', of physical and moral nation-making in which the "charming amateurism and eccentricity" (Holt, 1989:278) of the 'imperial sportsman' manifested itself as a distinctively British type and one in which the sartorial display of "class differences were immensely important" (Holt, 1989:236). As we saw in chapter four, these trappings of wealth (as well as the notion of 'amateurish eccentricity') have penetrated the geographical imagination to become associated with a quintessential British look that is perceived around the globe in terms of high society and in commodities that visually represent high monetary value and exquisite taste. This version of Britishness, in which good taste and cultural-economic rank is inherited, also revolves around a code of exclusivity and exclusion. Luxury goods (such as haute couture fashion) are symbols of high status due to their class-related cachet. This cachet is mobilised through a prohibitive system in which a combination of asking-prices and what C. McDowell (1994:219) terms as "way-out" design vocabularies manifest a "working-class alienation", rendering them widely inaccessible, and thereby exclusive, and where this exclusiveness, in turn, makes these luxuries extremely covetable. The dress codes and favoured labels of "monied London" socialites and "rural squires" (Franklin, 1997: written correspondence; Goodrum, forthcoming) have therefore come to be a national *leitmotif* and have helped to forge an idea of Britishness with a very specific class identity. As the wealthy and/or landed gentry consistently appear as iconic national citizens, the important point again emerges that fashion plays a key part in defining and articulating the criteria for national belonging and still further, that national identity is as much about exclusion and restriction to the nation than about solidarity and inclusivity.

The mainstream, affordable fashion and mass style that embodied the American Dream went against the very grain of British fashion and its deeply aspirational overtures. "You know you've made it" says the display director at Burberry, perhaps the best-known of all aristocratic British labels, "when you go out and buy your first Burberry coat...it's a status thing" (author's interview). This sentiment is in line with the Veblenian tradition (see chapter two, section 2.7) in which fashionable dress was indeed a luxury only afforded, and therefore flaunted, by a monied class fraction in the process of 'conspicuous consumption'. The "Well Bred" (Burberry magazine advertising) chose to wear Burberry to signify their good taste and a certain privileged lifestyle, whilst the remaining British masses had to content themselves with popular pursuits, going to the Saturday match dressed in something straight from the rails of their local downtown chainstore. As Spencer (1992:40) argues,

"[in Britain] the uniform of jeans, blouson, T-shirt and trainers...clothes almost every other GBM [Great British Male].... Hunched into a technicolour bomber jacket, hands in pockets and elbows flapping, indigo legs tapering spindily into rubber shoes, ass and belly hanging - much of working class male Britain now resembles budgerigars in running shoes. The Hunt Ball may still dress in the style of its grandfathers, but on the football terraces of the Stanley Matthews era, the aliens have landed."

(Spencer, 1992:40)

It was during the 1980s that these seemingly unflinching class divisions in both the fashion system, and in access to certain class-related lifestyle brands, began to alter quite significantly. Both Mulberry and Paul Smith played significant roles in the conspicuous consumption that was to characterise the decade. Both organisations intuited the rise of the status-defining label and both became highly desirable 'must-haves' among the rising style conscious and particularly among an emerging lifestyle group termed as the 'yuppies'. The following discussion examines the, often starkly

different, discourses that surrounded these two companies and how, nonetheless, both Paul Smith and Mulberry were involved in the creation and mobilisation of new class - and consumer - identities whose main preoccupations were with lifestyle branding, consumption and the display of status. As Mort (1988:208-9) argues during the eighties,

"the move was towards market segmentation and diverse lifestyle profiles...the market had filled up with segmented consumer profiles both up and down the scale: C1s, C2s, yuppies, sloanes, the working woman, the gay man, the young elderly.... The idea was to create a mood where consumers experience their quintessential individuality in the product".  
(Mort, 1988:208-9)

### **5.3 Hey Big Spenders: The 1980s and the yuppie**

In the 1980s the City of London acquired a spectacular role as the site of a new unfettered capitalism and of its associated regimes of conspicuous consumption. At this time "London", writes Mort (1996:171) "was the centre for a national orgy of material excess". This gross materialism was attributed to a new 'disestablishment' and the accelerated rise of a Thatcherite enterprise culture. The mushrooming of financial markets attendant on the deregulation of 'Big Bang' spurred a novel set of private business interests that were "meritocratic rather than egalitarian, efficient rather than generous, individualistic rather than corporate" (Lloyd, in Thrift and Leyshon, 1992:283). However what is particularly interesting, is that along with this new commercial focus on enterprise and on a service economy, also came new forms of social actors, specifically in the form of a group of middle-class (male) workers who were identified as being of key significance in the socio-economic changes that were sweeping the country. Dubbed as a 'new service class', (McDowell, L., 1997; Savage *et al*, 1992; Thrift, 1989; Urry, 1986) the champions of this emerging class fraction were

those 'young urban professionals' or 'yuppies' foremostly to be found in the financial services sector but also encompassing the 'movers and shakers' of the cultural industries and certain areas of the 'caring' professions such as therapists and 'shrinks' (McDowell, L., 1997; Mort, 1988). "Pre-eminently the yuppie was the personification of Britain's unstable economy and commercial culture during the 1980s" (Mort, 1996:171). Their large salaries and bonuses, combined with an appetite for hedonism in which the boundaries between work and leisure became increasingly blurred meant that the yuppie lifestyle was one defined through consumption, images and the aestheticisation of daily life (Giddens, 1990; 1991). Wealth was the reward for individual effort, high pressure, a pugilistic environment and hard work. The yuppie, "driven by an excessive desire to spend money" (Mort, 1996:172), did not conserve these newly found riches. Indeed this new middle class was said to be absolutely "fascinated by identity, presentation, appearance, lifestyle and the endless quest for new experiences" (Featherstone, 1991b:44) with questions of style and performance, of the ownership and possession of a range of 'positional' goods (Hirsh, 1978; Thrift, 1989) - the Filofax, a Peugeot car, Jermyn Street brogues and a gentrified flat in an inner area (McDowell, L., 1997; Spencer, 1992; Zukin, 1988) - becoming iconic markers of this distinctive, and exceptionally visible and high profile emerging class community.

With rocketing numbers of affluent people to be found in the City of London, then, the challenge for the *nouveau riche* of the 1980s was to spend their vast disposable incomes in tasteful ways. The yuppie's high income had to therefore be converted into personal wealth. In other words, Marx's abstract community of money had to be transformed into a more concrete community of the *monied*. It was in this crystallisation from the abstract to the concrete that fashion came to the fore. As Polan, (1992:6) argues,

"for several years many of us wanted to be rich. We seemed to crave a lifestyle which divided its time between the stress of the City boardroom and the tedium of competitive rural pursuits. If we could not have what we craved, we dressed for it anyway.... It was fashionable to appear wealthy and an army of the fashion-aware would break the bank to own the correct accessories, to signal that they belonged to a club based on wealth and taste".  
(Polan, 1992:6)

Aspirational fashions and the conspicuous consumption of designer labels thereby took on immense significance in the, often outrageous (figure 39), performance of acquired wealth. The purchasing of designated 'status-defining' fashion brands became one of the most effective means with which the City's newly wealthy could define themselves as 'having arrived' and provided the new middle classes with almost instant social mobility and a way of accruing Bourdieu's (1980; 1984; 1986) much sought after social and cultural capital. In short, "the new cult of the label", writes Spencer (1992:41) "ensured that social mobility could be bought off the shelf".

The yuppie was in a financial position to demonstrate the ownership of prestigious assets and to indulge in a lifestyle previously only accessible to the members of far higher echelons of society. What is particularly important here is the way in which the yuppie aspired to and in turn adopted the dress 'ways' of a very specific, and long established, élite. In order to act the part of a monied member of the 'smart set' the new middle classes had to dress for it and therefore "the yuppie aped ruling-class tradition - the big shouldered, double breasted business suit, the yachting blazer, polished black Oxfords from the quad" (Spencer, 1992:42). First and foremost the yuppie was a sartorially-based identity, then, brought into being and actualised through the wearing of prestigious labels, embossed logos and the fashion-led consumption of luxury brands,



Figure 39: The outrageous performance of acquired wealth. Here, some of the cast from the 1980s soap opera 'Dynasty' flaunt the extravagant look that defined the decade. Note the inflated and squared-off shoulder line of the female cast members. This is an example of 'power dressing' with shoulder pads enabling females to emulate both the male physical form as well as a masculinised sense of power and authority. *Dynasty* was an American-based soap. The acquired wealth on display here in the dress of the *Dynasty* 'nouveau riche' feeds into my discussion in section 5.2 on Americanisation-as-homogenisation and its perceived 'elimination of value and distinction'.

'the label' bestowed taste and style on the status-hungry wearer. As Spencer (1992: 41-2) explains,

"It was as if the new regime could not tolerate the social gaffes of the seventies *nouveau riche*; the suburban kitsch of purple swivel chairs and ankle tickling carpets, footballers in kipper ties with a knot as big as your ankle, the tacky Mediterranean tan of medallion

man. The label, which was suddenly flipped through fashion's looking-glass to the outside of the garment, was not only the apogee of conspicuous consumption, it bestowed the certainty of good taste for which previous *nouveaux* could only grope".  
(Spencer, 1992:41-2)

What we are seeing here is how the yuppie employed the designer label as an important tool in the creation of an 'aura of taste', for taste, in turn, signified wealth, which in turn signified membership to the (new) bourgeoisie. The ownership of 'appropriate' cultural artefacts, the Barbour jacket; the Hermés silk square; the Vuitton luggage; the Gucci moccasins; the quilted Chanel handbag; the Cartier watch; the Dunhill document case (Polan, 1992:6), all of these accessories were about the accumulation and subsequent display of social and cultural competence through the use of 'positional' goods. What is particularly interesting however, is that as well as symbolising socio-economic status, a great deal of these positional goods also provided an interrelated commentary on national identity and were potent symbols, not just of class, but also of Britishness. The form of this British identity consumed by the upwardly mobile was sanitised, partialised and drew heavily on a romanticised, and decidedly rural, idyll. Thrift and Leyshon, (1992: 298), for example, discuss how the yuppie's aspiring to a patrician lifestyle saw the signs and symbols of an older pastoral Britain being "dusted off" (in an act, perhaps, of 'wilful nostalgia', see section 2.6). The new middle classes increasingly wanted to "tog up for the country" (1992:307) and to appropriate the codes of a rural way of life that revolved around a national, prestigious and time-honoured iconography of squirehood and fieldsports (see figure 40). It was through such traditional iconography, an iconography also inhabited by certain clearly defined dress identities, that the new bourgeoisie found a way of reflecting back - and buying into - guaranteed good taste.



*Figure 40: Toggling up for the country. This image shows the typical uniform employed by those lusting after a patrician way-of-life in which weekends were spent at the family seat in the country. The Barbour waistcoat and green Hunter wellington boots featured here came to take on particular significance during the 1980s. The aspirational nouveau riche were labelled 'the green welly brigade' in reference to their adoption of certain prestige-invoking sartorial icons.*



#### **5.4 The Boom Years: Mulberry and the new bourgeoisie**

Mulberry was in the vanguard of 1980s yuppie styling, a company that seized on the prevailing *zeitgeist* and found heady success (as documented in chapter three) under its flourishing aspirational aesthetic. The yuppie wanted to transform hefty salaries and large bonuses into investments and in goods that would demonstrate Bourdieuan 'honourability' - a consumer niche in which Mulberry excelled. Not only did Mulberry specialise in 'designer classics' that would stand the test of time and which sought inspiration from aristocratic dress straight from the Shires of Britain - for example, the

'Hunting' jacket in olive and chocolate waxed cotton; the obligatory wool riding habit; the 'Hartley' fishing waterproof in muted country colours - but Mulberry also provided its customers with all the manifold props and accessories with which to complete their entire pseudo-manorial existences. For example, the company's product portfolio expanded during the eighties to include, a 'Rose and Lyre' china tea service; hand-blown wine goblets and 'Imperial' crystal tumblers; logo-ed pistol handled silver cutlery, and even Mulberry toothpaste and toothbrushes. For the new bourgeois consumers, then, Mulberry's vaunting of an explicitly privileged and idyllic lifestyle meant "even dotty squires came off the peg" (Spencer, 1992:41). As Mulberry's ready-to-wear design director explains,

"we don't make the product that is actually *the* product that you really do wear to hunt, shoot or fish in. So, the roots of the design lie there...and you will really find that people buy them because they hanker after the image of all of that and it tends to be an aristocratic image of all that.... It's, you know, lord of the manor type of influence. And what will actually happen is that those people who aspire to all of that will go out and buy these clothes and bags. So it is sold, after all, in cities, you know, our flagship store is in Bond Street, so very often it will be city people wanting a country look, but they are not really out there riding every weekend.... But even though we create clothing that will perform, it is not about purely functional country clothing. Not at all. And the country aspect of it tends to be associated perhaps with monied country in the sense that it's an aspirational look." (Author's interview)

What we are seeing here is how the Mulberry ethic was very much about the selling of a certain lifestyle that fed into a consumer vogue for social capital. With a substantial disposable income and preoccupied with status and the sterile trappings of success, the yuppie was a "narcissistic toad" inhabiting a world where the right look could be bought at any price (Chapman, 1988:232). Keen to buy appreciating assets, Mulberry's expensive goods were sold as potential heirlooms. The 'Roger's briefcase' for example was said to develop its charm and character over time as it became more weathered and

worn. "Like good wine" went the advertising slogan, "Mulberry improves with age". Even Mulberry's owner and founder, Roger Saul, indulged in the 'go-getting' image that epitomised the new bourgeoisie, marrying a Dior model and "forever dashing off in fast cars" (*Mulberry Life*, Autumn/Winter, 1996). Roger Saul was an international entrepreneur who divided his time between the hustle of London and his newly acquired fifteenth century manor house in the heart of the West Country. It is this discourse of the manor house that offers up a particularly significant narrative in the making of a class-related Mulberry lifestyle. For not only does Roger's own manor provide the backdrop for a great many of the company's photo shoots, design ideas and store interiors but (as I mentioned in chapter three) Mulberry also boasts its own country house hotel, Charlton House, that, in turn, provides a showcase for the company's home furnishing's collection, 'Mulberry Home', a collection that "is not country cottage but more manor house with these magnificent chandeliers" (ready-to-wear design director, author's interview).

Hirsch (1978) and Duncan, (1992) suggest that the country house has come to be an important part of the British positional economy. The value of country houses coming essentially from their scarcity, the finite number of historic and listed buildings translating to high desirability and high cultural and social rewards from ownership (Thrift and Leyshon, 1992; Jackson and Thrift, 1995). Mulberry has exploited such connections. In fronting many an ad campaign and PR event within the period splendour of country estates the company continually goes about forcing the link between its products, the idealised environs of the landed gentry, and the nationalised symbol of the patrician 'country seat'. (See for example the utilisation of class-related

discourses surrounding the Mulberry-sponsored tennis tournament held annually as a PR event at the Hurlingham Club - figure 41).

*Figure 41: Methodology Box*  
*The Mulberry Classic tennis tournament at the Hurlingham Club*  
**(Not Just) Anyone For Tennis**

*"The Mulberry Classic provides the ideal opportunity to step into the centre court of British style"*  
(tournament programme)



1998 was Mulberry's second year as title sponsors of the Mulberry Classic tennis tournament at the Hurlingham Club in London (16-20<sup>th</sup> June). In the run-up to, and during the event itself, I worked for Mulberry on a placement in the company press office, Bond Street, where the vast majority of the planning and organisation for Hurlingham was carried out. The event has two main functions: firstly it is one of a handful of tournaments on the Seniors world tennis circuit; secondly, it is a public relations vehicle for Mulberry. As well as many rounds of tennis, the five day event also includes a 'Ladies Day' (Wednesday 17<sup>th</sup>) where the latest Mulberry collections are previewed in a lavish lunchtime fashion show, and 'The Mulberry Midsummer Ball' (Thursday, 18<sup>th</sup>), an evening function including dining, dancing and a charity auction.

The setting of the tournament at the Hurlingham Club plays a crucial part in the enchantment of the entire event with a sense of 'Mulberryness' - of a certain sporting lifestyle enjoyed almost exclusively by the leisured class. Described by Mulberry as having a "majestic splendour", Hurlingham House (pictured above) was built in the 1760s and became an exclusive private club in 1869. The club was established as a retreat for parliamentary members and esteemed gentlemen, bringing a small piece of the countryside to the heart of London (SW6). With 17 ha. (landscaped by Humphry Repton) leading down to the River Thames, the club is famed for its sporting facilities, including over twenty tennis courts, croquet and bowls lawns, a cricket field and famed polo teams.

I arrived in the press office the day before the start of Hurlingham (Monday). Vanessa, the PR director and her PA, Kellie are responsible for the organisation of the Ladies Day fashion show, the Midsummer Ball, and specifically the guest list and publicity for each. Whilst they agonise over last minute arrangements, I'm given everything and anything to do: to answer the telephone and take messages (almost all of these are Hurlingham-related queries); to regularly check the fax machine and answer any requests for Hurlingham press releases; to 'chase'

newspaper picture editors by telephone and keep the list of 'confirmed' photographers for the Hurlingham photocall up-to-date, and to run general errands - for coffee, for Ladies Day dry cleaning, collating fashion show programmes etc.

Vanessa's main concern is the guestlist for the Midsummer Ball - it is overbooked. The paring down process turns into a very subjective popularity contest. An eminent BBC newsreader, for example, is declined tickets ('too boring'); a children's TV presenter is also turned down ('not enough of a celebrity'), and a soap actress has her invitation withdrawn following a much-publicised drug-taking allegation. In contrast, the socialites and 'It' girls who are much sought after by Mulberry as figureheads and publicity 'pullers' for the event are offered extra seats and small incentives to attend such as limousines and Mulberry discount vouchers. Vanessa markets the event to agents, editors and bookers via its glamorous 'premier' list of celebrity tennis players, including, Tara T-P; Tania Bryer; Henry Dent-Brocklehurst; Anneka Rice, Helen Lederer and Anna Walker. This group of successful and starry celebrities is considered as the embodiment of 'Mulberryness', all have a consummate cultural pedigree, with the 'right' connections to high profile aristocratic families and come from suitable backgrounds leading privileged and glamorous lifestyles. To reinforce this notion of pedigree, the Mulberry Classic is also emerging as a rising part of the Season. The models at the Ladies Day fashion show, for example, are all debutantes (Aimee le Roux, Francesca Pinto, Lisa Perkins, Zara Simmonds) and are commonly referred to as "the brats" by the press office members in reference to their gilded existences and ridiculed for their tantrums, their po-faces on the catwalk, and their "prima-donna" behaviour.

The selection criteria for Hurlingham is therefore all about the accumulation of class-related cachet. Hurlingham provides the perfect 'stage' upon which the perfect 'cast' is carefully handpicked to act out the spectacle that is the Mulberry way-of-life. Those making it on to the 'premier' list do so because they aid the mobilisation of Mulberry's corporate values and help realise the privileged lifestyle to which consumers might aspire. The boundaries to this lifestyle are very tightly defined - and policed - by Mulberry. As we see here, those deemed as being unrepresentative of the corporate lifestyle are quite simply denied access to it, in this case, with the vetoing of invitations.

Mulberry Home represents one of a rising number of fashion brands that have expanded into the home accessories business in recent years (Leslie and Reimer, 1997). Following declining clothing sales across all international markets, the likes of Guess, Liz Calibourne and Ralph Lauren have looked towards the space of the home as offering their consumers a more comprehensive sense of identity, effectively transforming the way we dress into a complete way of life and enabling a presentation of the self both in and through prescribed settings. As Crang (1996) argues, the emphasis here is on the 'correct' performance of products and the practice of product lores as lived, rather than as simply imagined, experiences. This is particularly pertinent in relation to Mulberry, a company that has not only created a Home

Collection, but, in the Charlton House hotel (figure 42) has also developed its own living corporate 'theatre' from which to give entire masterclasses in the appropriate deployment of Mulberryness.

*Figure 42: Charlton House. Mulberry's country house hotel in Shepton Mallet, Somerset.*



Roger Saul and his wife bought Charlton House, a rambling, run-down, Georgian-fronted hotel dating back to 1630, as the answer to their concerns over the lack of atmosphere and space in their retail outlets and the subsequent constraints this put on the effective display and marketing of the Mulberry Home collection. As an in-house article argues,

"They [Roger and Monty Saul] not only knew they could create the perfect Country House Hotel experience, but here was a living, breathing theatre for the Mulberry Home Collection. 'One of my biggest frustrations with our home furnishings and decorating business has been that we have never been able to fully understand how our concepts were ending up in people's living rooms' explains Roger".

(Mulberry Life, Autumn/Winter 1997-98)

Therefore, in order to leave nothing to chance and to guard against inappropriate or unsuitable interpretations from customers, we see here how Mulberry went about employing Charlton as a form of insurance against bad taste and stylistic gaffes and as a very explicit showcase in which consumers could 'learn' how to become fully fledged Mulberry 'man' and Mulberry 'woman'. As promotional material further elaborates, Charlton House is the place,

"Where Mulberry comes home.... For the ultimate experience of how to mix colours and textures, shapes and sizes and how to get some wonderful ideas for your own home decorating...and at the same time enjoy and wallow in the peace and tranquillity of the Somerset countryside...take a break at Charlton House and The Mulberry Restaurant".  
(Mulberry website)

Here, Charlton House, described as the 'ultimate Mulberry experience' is a blueprint for the display, use and performance of Mulberryness. "From fabrics to furniture and furnishings, to throws, tableware and lighting, the style is pure, unmistakable Mulberry" (Home brochure 1997-8). Alongside the presentation of the Home collection, then, the remit of Charlton was about the creation of an environment in which guests would feel like well-loved visitors in a 'true' country house<sup>21</sup>. To this end, the four and a half acres are scattered with croquet hoops, there is a plashing brook, 'distressed' tennis court and stripy lawn. Indoors, meanwhile, the 'lived-in' feel is taken a step further. Weathered riding boots are casually<sup>22</sup> discarded in the hotel porch along with other nostalgic paraphernalia such as lacrosse sticks, heraldic emblems and a faux 'family gallery' of

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<sup>21</sup> Again the notions of 'authenticity' and 'personalisation' emerge here. As we saw in chapter four, the 'selling' of an 'authentic' British lifestyle is aided through familial connections and a sense of history. To this end, Charlton House is promoted as being a traditional 'country seat', as being like an old family estate, where visitors can, for a brief period, 'perform' the role of guest-of-the-aristocratic-family.

<sup>22</sup> Mulberry goes to great pains to engineer this sense of the 'casual' (recall DeBord's [1997] 'Gestalt of the Casual' in the selling of the J.Crew lifestyle, sections 2.5-2.6). The 'casually' discarded riding boots, for example, are stuffed with yellowing newspaper in order to assume the outward façade of nonchalance.

framed Mulberry ad campaigns featuring dogs, men with guns and India Hicks (a 'well-connected' socialite-turned-model). The sixteen bedrooms are fitted out with carved four posters and *objects* taken straight from Mulberry's own ambitiously named 'Room at the Top' or 'Bohemian Aristocrat' interior ranges. The type of home that Mulberry has created at Charlton House is luxurious, manorial and, above all else, realises an Anglo-British idyll of the imagination. The opulent, almost regal, surroundings signal well-heeled and prosperous connections and with prices starting at £195 for a one-night stay at the hotel; £160 for a Home collection cushion, and £2,900 for a bleached elm armchair, the Mulberry country house experience is both exclusive and exclusionary.

Not everyone, then, is able to feel 'at home' in these surroundings. Most perceptibly perhaps, these socio-economic boundaries to the Mulberry lifestyle 'club' are brought to bear in the selling of Charlton under the slogan "a place in the country" (Autumn/Winter campaign, 1997-98). The question here, of course, is exactly '*whose* place?' is Charlton House and the 'green and pleasant' discourse that surrounds it. For Mulberry's aristocratic pretensions, played out in the "Merchant Ivory setting" (Lane, 1998b:76) of its own landed estate, suggests that 'belonging' to this corporate vision of rural Anglo-Britain is solely the reserve of the (white, fit, hearty, holy) bourgeoisie.

Due in large part to the abiding 'aura of snobbishness' that Mulberry, as we see here, has cultivated around its products, the company was, for several years during the eighties, a brand leader amongst the new middle classes who were searching for a sense of coherent identity. Mulberry's strength in this era of conspicuous consumption was to dictate a very clearly defined lifestyle to its consumers and to sell a strong sense of tribal belonging through a brand characterised by, and appealing to, aspiring fractions.



However, as the hedonism of the yuppie years gave way to economic recession and a post-consumerist ethos (Arnold, 1999; Mort, 1996; Polan, 1992; Rawsthorne, 1992), the luxury goods industry, in which Mulberry was so absolutely enshrined, found itself sliding deeper into the doldrums, the opulence and excesses of a brand culture giving way to newer, "more spiritual" (Polan, 1992:6) and subtler fashion statements that were "a form of resistance to imposed definitions of identity and lifestyle" (Arnold, 1999:286-7). Rawsthorne (1992:2) elaborates on the changing consumer trends, arguing that,

"The recession [has] left consumers with less money to spend - it has contributed to the back lash against the conspicuous consumption of the 1980s by creating a new climate in which splashing out on status symbols is not *quite* the thing to do.... The new themes in fashion, the *hippy nouvelle* styles in the latest Paris and Milan collections, and the 'grunge' look that surfaced in New York, are not suited nearly as well to the needs of the luxury goods groups as the glossy fashions of the 1980s". (Rawsthorne, 1992:2)

It was with this new consumer atonement for previous material excesses that Mulberry began to lose its appeal. Aggressively defending its somewhat dictatorial stance on the shape, form and membership criteria of the Mulberry way of life, the company refused to embrace what was a rapidly changing marketplace in which the rigidity of such clearly defined and dictated lifestyles were increasingly deemed *passé* (see chapter two). The new nineties taste communities wanted to express the inherent ambivalence of their identities. Therefore, it was only the occasional gesture towards retro-styling from Mulberry, notably in their resurrection and reworking of the 'sad' seventies beanbag in 'sexy' leather that "almost single-handedly" saved the otherwise outmoded company from total extinction (Abrahams, 1998:52; Taylor, S., 1998). Again, then, we are seeing the emergence here of what seems to be a presiding theme behind Mulberry's decline in popularity. As I outlined in chapter three, Mulberry's refusal to bend with wider fashion

trends; its steadfast maintenance of an 'upmarket' image; its persistent use of an overbearingly instructive voice, and a suspicious attitude towards change, appear once more as key contributors in the company's current slump in fortunes. Therefore, as the style press pronounce that "conspicuous wealth is out, grunge (sleaze to you) is in" (Polan, 1992:6), Mulberry's lack of innovation and its decision to cling immovably to a dated and out of touch retail formula, their packaging of snobbishness and the commodification of the British class system, has alienated the emerging generation of consumers "who yodel with hilarity at the idea that somebody actually takes that nonsense seriously" (Bennun, 1998:4).

Mulberry, then, seems to remain firmly embedded in the classist discourses of eighties yuppie Britain. Paul Smith, however, has dealt very differently with these changing class-related consumptive landscapes. In the section that follows I examine how Paul Smith, the one-time icon of the eighties upwardly mobile, has gone on in the nineties to promote a countercultural aesthetic based on notions of kitsch, irony and the surreal. Through this renunciation of 'cultural pedigree' (Bourdieu, 1984) and the established canons of good taste, Smith has cast off his eighties legacy and chimed into - and indeed mobilised - the nineties trend towards individualism (see section 2.3). It is with Smith's weaving of contradictory and opposing discourses, "of Ivy League with a glottal stop" (Jones, D., 1995c: 3), that he both commentates on, and in many ways, disrupts the conventions of the (British) fashion 'establishment'. In so doing we find that Paul Smith's selling of 'British individualism', where the high brow/low brow fracture on what much of fashion has been founded is completely exploded, very much sets the pace in a contemporary marketplace characterised by the diversity of people, identities and styles. As Paul Smith argues (in Jones, D., 1995c: 3),

"Paul Smith clothes have never had anything to do with class, in fact they've always tried to subvert any of those connotations. I've made a point of mixing styles to such an extent that they've become classless.... Other countries might have a larger quantity of better dressed people, yet they all look the same to me. The British have a much more lateral way of thinking about everything, from the way we dress, to the music we make, to the things we consume, we're free spirited". (Smith, P., in Jones, D., 1995c: 3)

### **5.5 It's Hip To Be Square: Paul Smith and the new style autodidacts**

During the eighties, Paul Smith's sharp, tailored and business-like styling became the ultimate hallmark of 'power broker' and 'young professional' dressing. Credited as the force that brought the Filofax to millions of desktops and the father of the executive toy, Paul Smith was one of *the* labels that "every jumped up estate agent or futures-dealer knew to aspire to" (Spencer, 1992:42). What is particularly important here, however, is the way in which Paul Smith has successfully, and quite purposefully, killed off this association as *the* 1980s yuppie designer. "That tag worked at the time" says Smith "but I've moved on since then" (Smith in Holgate, 1998:198). For Paul Smith is very much a forward-thrusting company, constantly looking to adopt new ideas, always innovative and tirelessly seeking ways in which to improve its set-up. In this progressive game plan, complacency and 'standing still' do not feature. As Frankel (1998a:21) points out,

"Although it would have been easy for the designer [Paul Smith] to go down with the Eighties, it is one of his considerable skills that he, unlike many others, has been able to continue doing very much his own thing while keeping up with the times".

(Frankel, 1998a:21)

For three decades, then, Paul Smith has been a force to be reckoned with precisely because he has moved with the times and at several intervals disavowed what has been an exceptionally successful past in favour of being 'up to speed' with the emerging contemporary scene. Smith has, he says, cast off all the trappings of "the Big Bang,

City of London thing" (Smith in Billen, 1995:41), playing down his eighties yuppie tag and the idea of the designer label and focussing instead on being the country's leading designer and retailer of the nineties.

For example, his latest anti-materialist stance has surfaced in a full-on crusade against a predictable and mind-numbingly-dull retail environment. Paul Smith, in this latest incarnation, is very much the antithesis of the lifestyle toting and prescriptive eighties 'label'. He has gone to great lengths to steer himself away from the dictatorial in order that he might chime in with the rising non-conformist consumer mood (recall for example the 'I won't be dictated to' slogans cited in chapter two, a sign of more individualised and flexibly specialised consumption techniques). Smith (in Jones, 1995c:3) argues,

"I'd like to think I've been fairly honest about what I do...I'm not selling a lifestyle or anything as crass as that. It's not even fashion, really, it's just clothes. I want my customers to put their own personality on what they buy, and the clothes allow people to express their own character rather than have it overwhelmed".

(Smith in Jones 1995c:3)

The rejection of 'lifestyle', of modes of conspicuous consumption and the conventions of middle-class smartness that we see here are extremely significant, for they highlight a much wider set of politics regarding the very definition of fashion and distinction in a post-consumer era. The demeanour of anti-fashion projected by Paul Smith is reminiscent of Thornton's (1997) discussion of the taste preferences attached to dance culture in the early to mid 1990s. Followers of popular music were considered naïve and uncritical by clubbers on the 'hip' peripheral dance circuit. "They were denigrated for having indiscriminate music tastes, lacking individuality and being amateurs in the

art of clubbing" (Thornton, 1997:220). Thornton sets up a dualism between those cluelessly indiscriminate arbiters of mainstream culture and the far more discerning and discriminating supporters of 'the hip' who actively distance themselves from uniformity and rigid lifestyle dictates. Distinction here, it seems, is less about Bourdieu's rigid class hierarchies and more about other forms of cultural capital, namely cultural and stylistic expertise (think back to the example of Harold MacMillan in section 2.8 and the way in which his 'frumpy' cardigan became 'trendy' - due to its intrinsic 'uncoolness' - among certain style communities).

This form of stylistic competence is borne out in the case of Paul Smith. For Smith targets, and appeals to, those consumers seeking to be part of alternative taste communities characterised by difference, diversity and, above all else, the display of "knowingness" - of a certain knowledge of what is 'in' and what is not (McRobbie, 1989:42). The Paul Smith consumer is therefore the antithesis of the "hapless dupe" (Jackson, 1995:1875) that we saw discussed in chapter two. Rather than buying ubiquitous international labels, these consumers favour rarer labels and locally derived brands (Crewe and Beaverstock, 1998). In this way a preference for Paul Smith reveals higher levels of cultural competence since the form of distinction bestowed by this brand is less to do with the exhibition of pecuniary strength and more to do with knowledge, skill, discernment and being 'in tune' with trends. Smith argues (in Crewe and Beaverstock, 1998:302) that with his clothing,

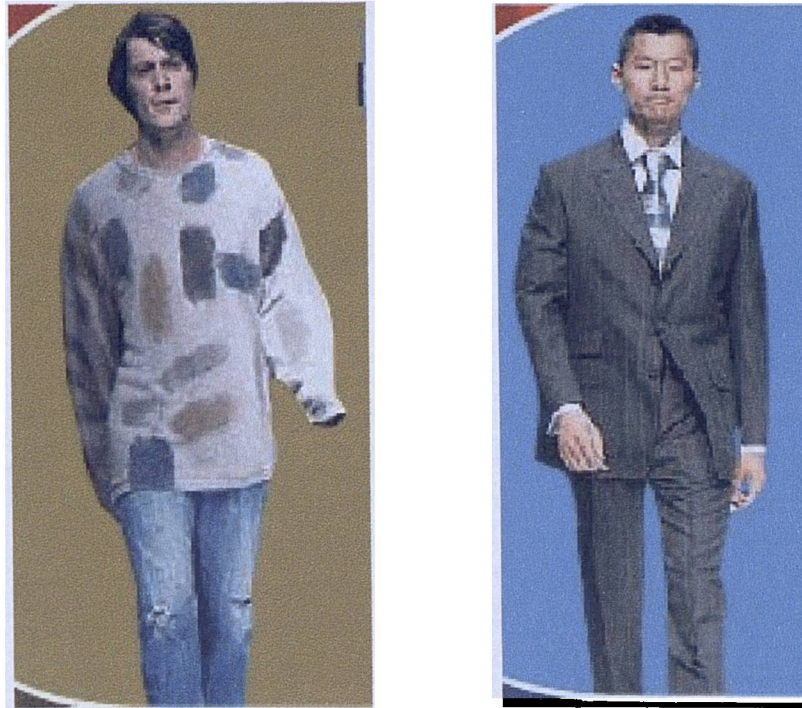
"You get kudos and credibility - it shows you're an interesting person, maybe a cultured or artistic person. The barristers and solicitors and all those people who are considered very boring might wear Paul Smith in the evening to prove they're not".

(Smith in Crewe and Beaverstock, 1998:302)

The Paul Smith consumer possesses vast quantities of cultural capital and has an acquired knowledge about clothing and tastes that enables competent statement-making against common dress codes and the dull daytime uniforms of office-bound professionals. Davis (1992:161) articulates this sentiment as being the "vicissitudes of negation", whereby "at the subjective level, the oppositional stance of antifashion, however timid or tentative its gesture, distinguishes it at once from fashion *indifference*". Therefore we find that Paul Smith man and Paul Smith woman are resolutely positioned as anti-mainstream, buying clothes "which scream when you want them to, not when you least expect it" (Jones, 1995c:3). There is a sophistication here that reveals conscious and informed decision-making - in essence Paul Smith represents a refusal to jump on the bland, highstreet bandwagon. The key approach here is one of a casual disregard for more obvious manifestations of wealth and the cultivation of a cynical disdain for money and élitist high culture. Smith elaborates, arguing (in Billen,1995:42) that,

"If you wear Versace or Chanel or whoever, their styles are so distinctive that what you are saying is: 'I am very fashionable,' or: 'I am very wealthy and I am part of this club.' What I am trying to do is allow people to say: 'I am me'.... It is not about selling more. It is not about my label. Our jeans will have a little tag but not a huge embossed logo. I mean, it is very interesting. If you look in Japan, Ralph Lauren, Calvin Klein, Donna Karan, 70 per cent of their business is just logo business - T-shirts and things just with their logo on. I think it is a sell-out. They are not wrong in business terms. It is just their motivation".  
(Smith in Billen, 1995:42)

What we are seeing here is how Paul Smith has formulated an aesthetic of individuality and irony in direct opposition to those purveyors of the *status quo* who seek to rule the style world through deeply commercial, homogeneous fashions. Smith's 'Artists and Dealers' collection of Spring/Summer 1998, for example, poses a challenge to 'tasteful',



*Figure 43: Smith's 'Artists and Dealers' collection, spring/summer 1998. Paint smeared artist sweaters and torn jeans (left) are juxtaposed with the slick pinstripe suiting of dealers (right).*

run-of-the-mill fashions by inverting many of the conventions of mainstream couture. Baggy jackets are turned inside out exposing seams, raw edges and mobilising a deconstruction trend, whilst paint-smeared sweaters (figure 43), knitwear with artful moth-holes and shabby seen-better-days fabrics are mixed with slick pieces of tailoring as a form of crass juxtaposition set to affront the refined sensibility of the 'parent' taste culture. This calculated strategy of shock and confrontation epitomises what Bourdieu (1984) has termed as 'autodidacticism' whereby new style autodidacts draw on unlikely sources for their design inspiration and mobilise the absurd for aesthetic effect. Highly ironic investments in the so-called trash and kitsch of unsanctioned culture are employed as a form of countercultural "refuge and revenge" (Sconce, 1995:379) against the orthodox good taste of an élite cadre of aesthetes. As Bourdieu (1984: 56-7) states,

"The most intolerable thing for those who regard themselves as the possessors of legitimate culture is the sacrilegious reuniting of tastes which taste dictates shall be separated".  
(Bourdieu, 1984:56-7)

Smith's scrambling of that which is deemed sacred and that which is profane; his use of juxtaposition, and his valorising of the low-brow, is therefore employed as a means of rampant individuality, a response to the blindly unimaginative hoards who follow orthodox dress codes and a deliberate confusion of the class-based hierarchy of style. As Bennun, (1998:4) argues, in a dun-coloured world, "the devotees of tat would like to believe that kitsch is a celebration of everything bright, colourful and alive".

Paralleling Smith's mission against the 'corporate' nature of big fashion business are other retail pioneers such as Café Pop in Manchester and Wayne Hemingway's Red or Dead chain. Like Paul Smith, both of these rely extensively on witty, eccentric - and thereby 'very British' - incursions to enliven and disrupt the uniformity of amassed global fashion (Crewe and Goodrum, forthcoming). Hemingway, for example, draws design inspiration from the saddest icons of low-brow culture. As Kingswell (1998:22) explains,

"The flotsam and jetsam that people discard fascinates Hemingway and has proved a rich source over the years. The walls of his office are covered with car-boot sale finds, every available surface filled with glass animals, snow-scene paperweights, straw donkeys and kitsch holiday souvenirs...Wedgwood china has to be one of the saddest things anybody could ever collect. Garden gnomes too...those pictures of doe-eyed boys and girls...the artificial print taken from those 1960s Formica tables".

(Kingswell, 1998:22)



Irony chic, it seems, is suddenly terribly fashionable. Paul Smith's latest retail venture, his Westbourne House outlet in Notting Hill (figure 44), is further testimony to the rising vogue for ironic strategies of consumption. Westbourne House, a magnificent

*Figure 44: Westbourne House in Notting Hill, London. Note the residential location, the garden gate, the privet hedges and front doorstep - an example of Smith's subtle wit, employed here to play upon ideas of 'the fashion house'. The residential location away from the chain stores and the uniformity of the British high street also mobilises Smith's campaign against the blandness of big business.*



terraced townhouse, is said to take its inspiration from nineteenth century *maison de couture* retailing. Its aim is to alter the entire way we shop through the realisation of Smith's longstanding dream to create a shop-in-a-home. Smith commissioned Sophie Hicks to redesign the interior of Westbourne House in a way that plays on notions of 'the fashion house'. Throughout, Hicks has abstracted ideas from residential traditions and deliberately picked and mixed the symbols and styles of residential design so that Westbourne House reads subliminally like a 'home' yet is clearly a privately run, highly

profitable venture. For example, Westbourne House has no shop frontage as such, only a very discreet Paul Smith logo over the front door, which is flanked by neatly trimmed hedges, a host of rare Victorian plants and even a garden gate. Inside, three storeys house six different rooms, each one given over to a different line in the Paul Smith collection. The dining room, for example is reserved for menswear, the nursery is for childrenswear. By scrambling the conventional boundaries between home and work, the public and private, retailing and domesticity, Smith employs Westbourne House to furnish our consumptional imaginations with new vocabularies of style.

Particularly pertinent here, is the way in which Westbourne House also takes on an ironic, even surreal approach (Menkes, 1998) to the Anglo-British country house discourse that has been utilised and replicated by so many other fashion companies in their store design (such as Lauren's 'Rhinelanders Maison' on Madison Avenue, New York, or Mulberry's commercial flagship on London's Bond Street, figure 45) and their wider corporate identities (recall Charlton House, Mulberry's hotel in rural Somerset). At the top of the hi-tech glass staircase, for example, is a "deliriously bad painting" (Lanchester, 1998:10) of a couple on their country estate, this tawdry picture being altogether more knowing and 'tongue-in-cheek' than similar design cues adopted by conventional flagship stores. Smith (quoted in *Drapers Record*, 1998:18-19) argues how,

"I am fed up with the way everybody is doing the clichéd route and they are all following each other and every designer has got to open on Bond Street or Madison Avenue and they are all using clichéd interiors.... So I have opened a shop in a residential area and hopefully it will mean people will come for the product and the excitement of going into the corner shop again".

(Smith in *Drapers Record*, 1998:18-19)

*Figure 45: Mulberry's flagship store on Bond Street, London. The 'design vocabulary' of the interior mobilises a wider corporate identification with the Anglo-British manor house and aristocratic lifestyle (refer to section 5.4). On the grand staircase is a faux family gallery, while the heavy wood fittings and fixtures, the 'antique' rugs and furniture also flag up notions of history, tradition and the family country seat.*



The domestic theme infused throughout Westbourne House is employed by Smith to reinstate a sense of intimacy, character, eccentricity and even light-heartedness in the slick world of profits and efficiency. The children's room epitomises this preference for the haphazard and (seemingly) uncontrived. Here, Paul Smith clothing is displayed at random amongst a host of outlandish fixtures and fittings, from distorting fairground mirror, to plastic dalek changing room, pinball machine, igloo hideaway and bubble gum dispenser, the thinking is innovative and individual.

### **5.6 Only Playing: Just how progressive is irony chic?**

The important point to be made here is that whilst these celebrations of low culture first look to be a political act of 'identification with the poor', when we scratch beneath the surface of what seems to be an explicit rejection of high-brow pretension, there is an

equally obtuse, inaccessible and sophisticated rhetoric going on involving the exhibition of a 'knowingness' that is still implicitly middle-class (Hall *et al*, 1977). As such, Sconce (1995:384) poses the question: "is the 'ironic' reading of 'reactionary' text necessarily a 'progressive' act?" For 'egalitarian' attempts on the part of the culturally privileged to collapse differences between 'high' and 'low' culture, as seen here in the case of Paul Smith, often ignore issues of 'access' to these two cultural realms (Gripsrud, 1989; Sconce, 1995). There is indeed a vast difference between those 'new style autodidacts' who invest in car boot sale finds and the 'jumble sale' look through *choice* and a desire for alternative and ironic forms of cultural capital - such as Paul Smith's satirical fabrics, his use of frays and emblems of kitsch - and those who consume the same - or similar - 'unstylish' low-brow artefacts due to *necessity* (Crewe and Goodrum, forthcoming; McRobbie, 1989). So we find that Paul Smith and his band of new style autodidacts are able to transgress conventional taste boundaries and invest in the 'bad' taste of unsanctioned culture because they have already acquired the requisite cultural - and economic - capital to do so. These members of the middle classes are so 'well off' that they can afford to play with the *idea* of looking poor and of having poor taste (McRobbie, 1989). Thus, as Sconce (1995:383) points out, though new style autodidacts,

"may attempt to disguise or renounce their cultural pedigree by aggrandizing...scandalous cultural artefacts, their heritage in a 'higher' taste public necessarily informs their textual and critical engagement of even the most abject 'low culture' forms".  
(Sconce, 1995:383)

The important point here, of course, is that in reality some people have access to both high and low culture but the majority only has access to low. In other words, those who have access to the codes and practices of consuming both 'high' and 'low' culture are in

the privileged state of having what Gripsrud (1989:139) calls "double access" and this double access is essentially a class privilege. As such, a taste for irony and kitsch may ultimately be an act of unintended middle class condescension - "a form of amused contempt among high culture buffs for the tastes of the wider public" (Bennun, 1998:4) - and an unconsciously patronising response to those who 'dress down' because they have to. For example, Wayne Hemingway (quoted in Kingswell, 1998:24) explains how,

"Probably my favourite car-boot find of all time is the Tchechnikov Lady [a mass-produced portrait painting].... She sums up the naff style of the 1960s and 70s - it's the archetype of what people with 'taste' wanted on their walls".

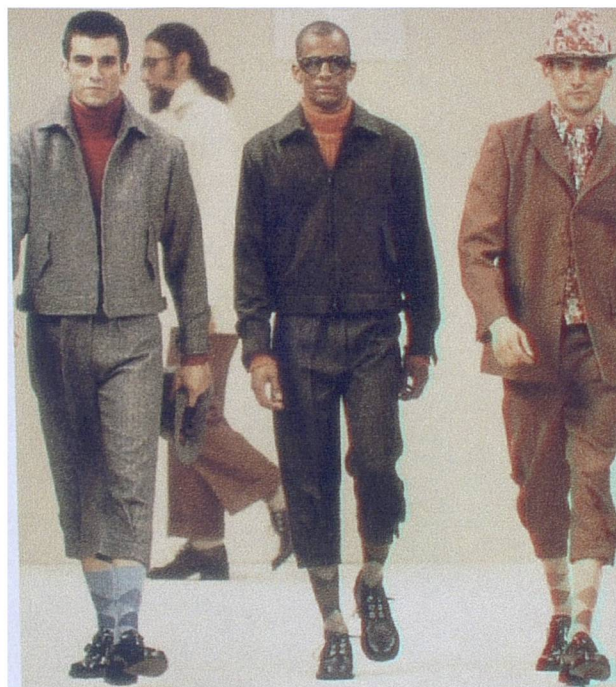
(Hemingway quoted in Kingswell, 1998:24)

These celebrations of trash from Wayne Hemingway and Paul Smith enable ways of mapping out one's taste territories whilst remaining safely within one's own élite taste culture. "It requires a certain level of sophistication. It's nostalgia with an ironic distance. It's kin to another semi-highbrow activity, the deliberate cultivation of bad taste. 'I like wearing the leisure suit because it looks weird and outdated. I *know* that.'" It is this absolutely essential knowingness, then, that creates a safe distance and that "prevents you actually looking like the dweeb who would have worn that in the real 70s" (Gripsrud in Crewe and Goodrum, forthcoming).

So it seems that the late 1990s was a time to make the uncool cool. While Paul Smith employed the incredibly naff image of Mills and Boon paperback romance novels as an advertising tool, Wayne Hemingway opted for the immeasurably uncool Geography Teacher as the inspiration for his 1997 catwalk collection (figure 46). Hemingway explains (Hemingway in Kingswell, 1998:28) how,

"We wanted to get across the way that often the coolest people in the world are those who are the most uncool and geography teachers embody that for me. It was like a really witty collection...taking styles and fabrics that would be classed as unwearable - corduroy, plus fours, geeky specs, dodgy tattershalls and shirts - all the clothes my geography teacher wore."  
(Hemingway, in Kingswell, 1998:28)

Figure 46: Red or Dead's Geography Teacher collection, 1997. Immeasurably uncool geography teachers inspired a 'knowing' look in which 'dodgy' shirts and 'geeky' corduroy were worn ironically in the deliberate cultivation of bad taste (refer also to section 1.5 and my discussion of Burberry's and Clark's resurgence in the 'cool' style stakes).



Whilst these ironic investments in the 'uncool' are therefore a characteristic of bourgeois 'knowingness', they nonetheless do still signal a confusion to long-held conceptualisations of taste in which high fashion and street style have been viewed as inhabiting quite separate imaginary worlds. As fashion editors urge us not to "even bother trying to be tasteful...the nerdy tanktop is making a comeback" (Adams *et al*, 1999:32), the cultural politics of style are being furnished with new taste vocabularies that draw inspiration from subcultures, second-hand dressing and those commonly

considered to be on the very margins of fashion consciousness. The Spring/Summer 2000 collections saw, for example, Issey Miyake giving a new lease of life to the dickie-bow, Copperwheat Blundell reviving the retro tracksuit and Kostas Murkudis, Wim Neel and Raf Simons all bringing back a version of the shell-suit. The simple divide between fashion and anti-fashion is therefore ever more ambiguous as the trash aesthetic that we have seen in the foregoing discussion grows in influence. Contrary to traditional notions, then, fashion no longer seems to move in one direction 'trickling down' from an élite to the majority but rather, as we see here in these ironic strategies, there are multiple fashion systems moving in many directions at any one time (see also my discussion on 'backpacker chic' in section 2.8).

In the remainder of this chapter, I examine these multiple systems still further by looking at several of the key geographical locations involved in their shaping and formation. As we have seen in the foregoing discussion, the siting of corporate practices such as outlets and promotional events assume a key role in the production and definition of symbolic meanings and are material expressions on which different taste communities may draw, define and, in some ways, even resist. In examining the corporate landscapes of Mulberry and Paul Smith and the geographical areas with which they have forged strong place associations it is possible to see how particular localities are "packaged" (Burgess and Wood, 1988:115; Sadler, 1993) for consumption by particular taste communities. As we shall see with Mulberry and Paul Smith, local cultural differences have been appropriated, marketed and sold in order to create meaningful, and *placed*, identities to aid a wider corporate project of value and distinction. It is through such place-specific identities that both organisations demonstrate what Pieterse (1995:49) has termed as the "globalization of diversity",

differentiating themselves from the faceless, and placeless, high street and mall and, in so doing, also offering up several very different (re)presentations - and class-related commentaries - on British style. With Mulberry, this style revolves around élitist class identifications, mobilised through their use of southern England and a 'Crown Heartland'. With Paul Smith, the unusual locations of corporate sites and outlets in the (gentrified) industrial Midlands and in London's trendy Covent Garden engender ideas of quirky British styling that transcend the class conventions of (imagined) British fashion.

### **5.7 Home-Spun Yarns: Remembering Mulberry's roots**

According to Sadler (1993) the selling of places is one of several routes through which dominant class images can be constructed, reinforced and replicated. As I discussed in chapter two (section 2.6), this packaging of locales has tended to revolve around historical and bounded references, that have, in turn, given rise to an unprogressive sense of place and one which is posited as an external problem for, or source of resistance to, the aggressive invasion of global forces (Cook and Crang, 1996; Harvey, 1990; Massey, 1993; 1994). Nowhere is this sense of wilful nostalgia, set to defend the sanctity and supremacy of bourgeois claims over place, more evident than in the case of Mulberry, a company that relies heavily on their identification with local legend and a strong sense of roots. Their regressive, backward-looking formulation is marketed as a foil to the perceived economic and cultural uncertainties of globalisation and the company is keen to assert its connections with history, enduring tradition and longevity,



of the idea of Mulberry products as potential family heirlooms, in order to counter the 'threat' from what are characterised as the insubstantial activities of a 'speeded up' world.

The marketing director argues that,

"I think that one of the things that Mulberry is proud of and genuinely, it genuinely has links to British craftsmanship in a particular part of the world. To a lot of people it is evocative of a certain way of life with certain values.... What is always quite interesting for a brand is that when things economically get quite difficult, people go back to basic values. They always go back to what they know and what they trust. And one thing people fundamentally trust is, because when things get tough, people want to know they are spending their money wisely and what happens is they always begin to play on the core values of tradition, heritage. What they're saying is, 'you can trust us because it's genuine quality and genuine craftsmanship'. And you'll find in the next eighteen months, more and more brands will start talking about where they've come from and how they've endured and the values they've got.... But if you speak to a lot of Mulberry customer's the reason why they buy Mulberry is the reason that it lasts them a lifetime and they say that this purchase is an investment. Although I might be paying £300, potentially it's a family heirloom, and what I'm going to do is pass it on. So while it might be a very high immediate spend, it's about the long-term". (Author's interview)

The sentiment expressed here is reminiscent of the perceived threat to aristocratic good taste from the post-war disposable 'pop' culture that I discussed earlier in the chapter. Mulberry's marketing director is keen to attach notions of endurance, authenticity and heritage to the company in a bid to distinguish it from the ephemera of the mass market and to infuse the organisation with a sense of high quality through notions of reliability and rootedness. In large part, these roots are forged via the strong identification between Mulberry and the rural landscape of Somerset and the Mendip countryside (see figure 47 for a map of key locations in Mulberry's UK operation). For the invention of a corporate place-myth and of a localised founding legend constructed around Roger Saul's family roots and his childhood home in the Somerset village of Chilcompton remains constantly in play. Thus, as the Mulberry 'story' is told and retold across the

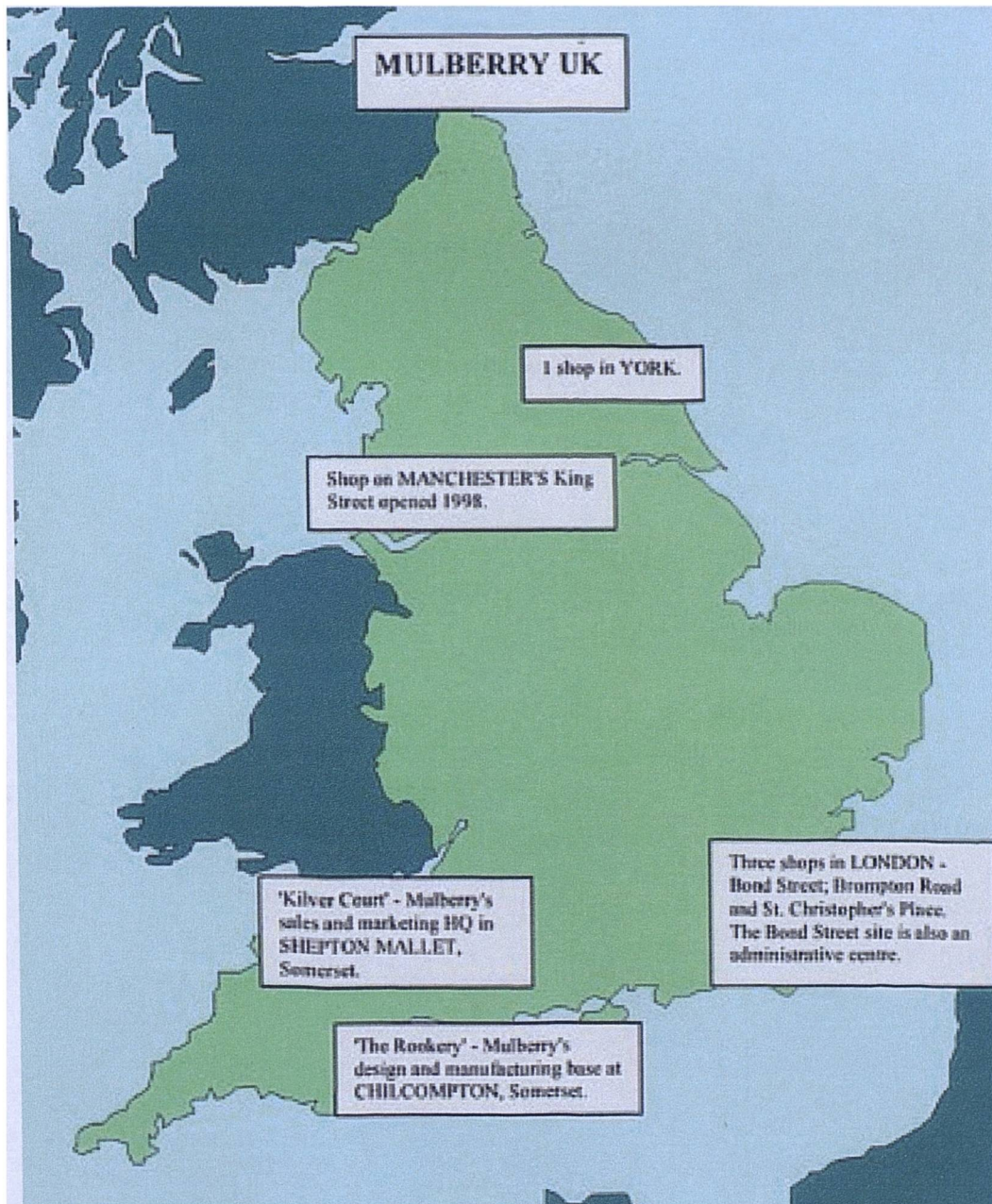


Figure 47: Key locations in Mulberry's UK operation.

commodity chain, the company assumes a powerful position as the narrator, and the custodian, of local history. It is through this narration that Mulberry mobilises a "constructed certitude" (Beck, 1997:62-8) to not only quell the fear of disposability symptomatic of a postmodern condition but also to reinforce the hegemony of its bourgeois voice.

Mulberry is very much spawned out of its locale. With its specialisation in the local crafts of tanning, saddlery and leather-related industry, it is very much embedded within, and reliant upon, a geographically specific pool of resources and skills that are bolstered by other major employers in the area such as Morlands (sheepskin products) and Clark's (shoes). The Mulberry headquarters in Somerset operate from two sites located approximately ten miles apart: design and production is housed at 'The Rookery' in Chilcompton, whilst sales and marketing is found on the slightly larger site at 'Kilver Court' in the market town of Shepton Mallet. The Rookery, a large, open plan factory with its own design studio and offices, is located on the fringe of the village and is built on the site of a dilapidated pig farm, acquired by Roger Saul as the company rapidly outgrew a series of different leased buildings within Chilcompton village. The shop floor workers are drawn from a radius of five miles around Chilcompton, with many employees starting as apprentices from school, learning the cutting or stitching trade and rising through the ranks of the company in a 'job for life'. The most obvious example of this ascendancy up the promotional ladder, is Mulberry's production director, who began her own career with the company in 1975 as a humble outworker before going on, almost twenty years later, to 'head up' Mulberry's entire international manufacturing procedure. The production director narrates her story:

"It all started, I had a young family and in the country it's not easy to go out and work. Mulberry offered the opportunity for the local mums, if you like, to work in their homes and therefore you are then able to look after the family at the same time, which was a great thing. I mean, you know, we live just out on the edge of the village [Chilcompton], so it wasn't easy to leave the children.... I was stamping the Mulberry logo and the size on the back of belts and the children were staying on at school, so I did want to be there when they came in at night. As they subsequently went their directions, I felt I began to become quite lonely. I think working at home is fine when you've got a family and a purpose but when they disappear or do their own thing you do notice a difference in that you're not in company or talking to anyone during the day and it makes it, makes it quite a lonely life. I didn't want to give up the job because I quite enjoyed what I did. So I then asked if an opportunity came to work 'in' as we called it in

those days - it wasn't even a factory in those days, it was a small building we were in - would they consider me." (Author's interview)

The production director went from belt stamper to running the belt table, then progressed to overseeing the belt-and-bag room with responsibility for nine co-workers, moving on to making-room manager, to production manager and then factory manager before finally rising to her current position as Mulberry's production director. What is important about this story is the way it provides an account of a very traditional system, one which looks back to the days when family-run businesses were located in, and grew out of, their hometown and where employees displayed immense loyalty and long lasting ties to their employer through a lifetime's service. Mulberry's operation in Chilcompton very much reflects this way of 'doing business' and, in their emphasis on roots, tradition and heritage, these values are in deliberate contrast to the multi-million pound and metropolitan enterprise of which they form such a fundamental part.

The Chilcompton workforce is a close-knit community, displaying immense pride and skill in their craft (recall for example the Mulberry factory workers derision of their rivals discussed in section 4.5.ii). In large part this is aided by Mulberry's philanthropic approach to the factory floor. For as Salaman (1997) observes, not only do organisations work to produce meanings for 'outsiders' such as buyers, franchisees and consumers through their corporate identities, but they are also involved in structuring meanings internally so that employees might better clarify their own identities both with and within that organisation. What is fascinating is the way in which Mulberry draws on its geographical surroundings at Chilcompton to inculcate notions of the corporate culture among its employees. Notions of exacting standards, solid values and a sense of Mulberryness are reflected in and through the material infrastructure of The Rookery

itself, as a space both of efficiency and artistry, and also through The Rookery's green and wholesome environs, namely, the agricultural acreages of the neighbouring livestock farm and the rolling countryside beyond. As the production director explains:

"We got to understand very early on what Mulberry was about...we feel we understand where he's [Roger Saul] coming from, or what he's looking for. I think we understand the naturalness of, he always looks for the naturalness in the leathers. It's something about everything being natural. You've only got to look at our grounds and the factory's green and the trees are there...the bit out the front where the sheep are belongs to us but we allow a farmer to put his sheep there, just, you know, keeps the grass down etcetera, and actually, in actual fact, as you're driving down the road it's quite easy to miss. It's only as you're going up you can actually see the factory. The mounds, or the hills, or whatever you want to call them, the mounds were actually landscaped like that, they weren't there originally, but to hide the car park and the factory.... I think it looks good and I love the fact it's green and the grass is there and the trees are there. You know, the tanks are hidden behind hedges. I just think it's the way it should be... And it's about standards. I mean I think that if you expect to have good quality from the workforce, then you've got to give them a good quality building and good quality lighting and good quality everything to encourage that. And I think if you're knee deep in rubbish and you know, the old building had bits falling down and the rain came through. I just don't think it, it generates that feeling of quality. 'Cos I think it, you know, quality is all about the whole thing. The way you deliver to your customers, it arrives right, it looks good, it's not just about product, the product you make, it's how you conduct the whole of the business."  
(Author's interview)

Here we see how the greenery of the local Mendip countryside, coupled with a concern for the conditions of its workforce, posit Mulberry as actively constructing a controlled and meaningful sense of place. This sense of place is defined and located in the almost pre-industrial arena of the Somerset backwaters. It is defined through an idyllic lens in which the Anglo-British countryside is cast as a retreat from the falseness of the (post)modern city and where Mulberry goods are viewed as organic products borne out of their locale. Such insularity and parochialism is, according to Chambers (1993), a striking characteristic of Anglo-centric versions of Britishness where the "quiet certainties of conservative and stable tradition" (1993:146) are signposted by the "earlier harmonies of rural life and artisan production". Therefore in the parochial, and

national, discourses to be found at Chilcompton, we discover a further site in Mulberry's refusal of the mechanical and commercial logic of industrial society. This refusal is a typically "British disease" in which "pseudo-aristocratic snobbery" (Robins, 1991:36) is identified as one of the driving forces behind this resistance towards urbanity, fragmentation and change.

Philo and Kearns (1993) write that local history is a key ingredient in the way in which the past is appropriated in the present. With Mulberry, this particular use of local history provides an especially important tool in its own corporate capturing of the past. As we have already seen, the long historical association between the tanning industry and the locality of Chilcompton has become a fundamental strand in Mulberry's 'internal' and 'external' corporate identity and when we turn to Mulberry's operation at its Kilver Court site in Shepton Mallet, Somerset, this sense of history dominates still further. As Domosh (1992:72) argues,

"When corporate executives make decisions about the location and design of their buildings, they are indeed creating images of their companies; they are involved in the complex activity of communicating by symbol the culture of which they are a part".  
(Domosh, 1992:72)

The Kilver Court building dates back to the Middle Ages and as Mulberry's sales, marketing and administration centre, it forms the very heart of the company. Built from local stone, Kilver Court is located on the main road out of the town and is sited directly opposite Shepton's major industrial employer, Matthew Clark (Babycham and cider distillery). A seemingly 'ordinary' building at first glance, what makes Kilver Court an absolutely remarkable site, and a fitting symbol for the company, is the landscaped

Figure 48: The gardens at Kilver Court, Shepton Mallet, Somerset. Tucked away behind the Mulberry office buildings, the Kilver gardens are secluded from public view. The backdrop to the garden is this magnificent brick viaduct, part of the late Somerset and Dorset railway.



garden secluded behind the main building, away from public view (figure 48). As in-house editorial describes,

"The diversity, romance and intrigue of Kilver Court's past, a past that takes in kings, courtiers, industrialists and the Church, is an endless source of inspiration to Roger Saul and his design team, as its setting. Their influences can be felt, sometimes distinctly, often discreetly, in the curve of a sofa arm, the patina of a button, the buckle on a bag or the flourish of a deep-hued flora on a wall-hanging. They might temper a colour palette, suggest new textures, or simply evoke an emotion. And no mean fountain-head of ideas are the Kilver Gardens." (In-house brochure c. 1995)

The gardens at Kilver comprise some three and a half acres and over five hundred species of plant. Part formal, part rambling, the web of walkways encompasses a large lake, complete with boathouse, swans and wildfowl, stepping-stones and a parterre planted in the colours of Mulberry livery. The *pièce de résistance*, however, is a towering brick viaduct, a remnant of the late Somerset and Dorset railway, which

provides a dramatic backdrop to the gardens and a grand reminder of a golden age of steam. The unique landscape to be found at Kilver Court is very much in keeping with, and aids the expression of, the notion of Mulberryness. Landscaped to the highest specifications, quirky in design, containing the deeply nostalgic vestiges of an earlier era and also indulging the nationalised conceit of the English as a nation of flower-growers, (Orwell, 1941; Samuel, 1992) the gardens are a corporate showcase, the very quintessence of the Mulberry ideology.

### **5.8 London Swings...but what about the rest of the country?**

Whilst Mulberry's split-site headquarters in Somerset therefore play both a necessary, and a symbolic, part in the company's continuing existence and its identification with rustic values, craft production and an idealised past, what is intriguing is the company's concurrent fostering of an emergent place on the London 'scene'. Mulberry has developed a stronghold on Bond Street in the very heart of the city's retail quarter, the site of its flagship store and also home to its London-based administrative centre operating on equal terms with its counterpart in Somerset. At once determinedly parochial, we nonetheless see here that the company is simultaneously active in creating a niche for itself in the metropolitan centre of London, a world city, a fashion hotspot and part of a globally extensive industry spanning from New York, to Milan, to Tokyo. What, then, are the reasons behind this paradoxical corporate relationship between the nostalgia of home and family ties back in the Mendip countryside and its heart-stoppingly chic location in one of London's smartest quarters? Crewe and Lowe (1995) suggest that the siting of fashion retailers is influenced by a whole host of complex interactions involving not just socio-cultural issues but also political-economic factors. Whilst it is tempting to explain the geography of design-based retailers (such as



Mulberry) in purely "identity-based" terms (Crewe and Lowe, 1995: 1885), it is also important to look at the "interconnections between identity, image and economics" when considering the motivations behind site selection. This interaction between economics and identity is particularly pertinent in the case of Mulberry, as the company's ready-to-wear design director outlines here,

"simply in sales terms it would be very difficult to achieve the sales we need to achieve if we weren't selling in a location like London. We didn't always have Bond Street, of course, so it was quite a significant step to open a flagship store in Bond Street and we did do it at just exactly the right time prior to it becoming so huge and practically inaccessible now with all of the space taken up with all of the big names.... Obviously from a design point of view it's wonderful to be in Bond Street, it's important in terms of brand recognition and, you know, it has given us a higher profile, so yes, it was a key step in the development of the company." (Author's interview)

The ready-to-wear design director cites several reasons here, both socio-cultural and political-economic in nature, for the company's choice of location in Bond Street. In terms of enabling its identity, the company is compelled to locate in London because of the city's presence on the national, and international, style circuit. As a foremost fashion journalist in the national print media argues,

"I don't think there are any major fashion designers in this country who have been successful without coming to London. It's where things happen. I mean people like to think that things do happen in other cities in Britain, but they don't happen as much as they do in London...I don't think there's any big conspiracy about it, it's where things happen". (Author's interview)

To achieve recognition, to be taken seriously and, above all, to 'make it', a presence in London, the epicentre of all that is fashionable, is deemed to be an absolute necessity (McDowell, C., 1994). Commercially too, the importance of trading from a London base is crucial, for, as we see here, in order to maintain a profitable quantity of sales,

Mulberry requires a certain degree of centrality as well as access to the economic and cultural capital of the metropolitan-based fashion savvy. The national fashion gaze, then, is very much focused on the capital city where creativity and commerce, press and publicists, infrastructure and events, all converge. What is important here, however, is the degree of domination that London has acquired, not only with regard to the fashion industry but also in wider national imaginings. For example, the pinnacle of the annual national fashion calendar is *London Fashion Week*, named after its host city but also reflecting a long established tendency to equate Britain - implicitly and explicitly - with what P. Taylor (1991:149) has termed as the "Upper England" of London and the south-east (see figure 49 for further discussion of the locational politics surrounding London Fashion Week).

*Figure 49: Methodology Box  
Place and politics at London Fashion Week*

**Up Front and Fashionable**  
The locational politics of the London catwalk

Twice a year, in spring and autumn, marquees go up in the grounds of the Natural History Museum in South Kensington, West London. This tented complex is host to London Fashion Week. During February 1998, I worked on a placement with Life PR, the public relations company used by the British Fashion Council (BFC) to co-ordinate Fashion Week. I was based in the Life PR offices on Harrow Road (W9) in the run-up to the event prior to moving on-site for the five days of catwalk shows. The siting and layout of Fashion Week gives an insight into the wider politics of the event and the industry of which it is a part.

Whilst the Natural History Museum is an imposing setting for London Fashion Week, the event is separate from the museum itself, taking place in three large tents aside from the main building and able to function quite readily in isolation from it. There is a logistical rationale behind the Natural History venue, since its proximity to South Kensington tube and the designer boutiques to be found in high class Kensington make for easy access. The marquees housing all the goings-on are also functional. As temporary structures, they can be tailor-made and built to the unique requirements of their different users. With, twenty catwalk shows held on-site; almost 150 designer collections on display in the 'London Designers Exhibition' (where a labyrinth of trade stands exhibit diffusion lines and smaller labels); 300 photographers; 2500 press people and buyers; chefs, bar staff and bottle washers, all having very esoteric demands over the space within these marquees, no permanent existing building is currently able to house the runways, changing rooms, hospitality lounges and trade fair under one roof.

Once inside the catwalk tents, what strikes me the most is their characterless nature. They are completely pared-down with plain black backdrops and a white runway surrounded by nothing but a handful of unremarkable chairs assembled in neat rows. This minimalism ensures that nothing detracts from the clothes themselves and also allows different designers to stage their shows in quick succession without the need to alter 'scenery' or backdrops.

The allocation of seats in the marquees is extremely political and displays the industry's hierarchy of personnel in a nutshell. Whilst the security guards yell at an anonymous and unruly crowd of ticket holders who will, seemingly, fight-to-the-death for admission, one of my tasks during Fashion Week is to meet and greet 'A'-list guests and celebrities, who are whisked to the

front of a near-hysterical queue, and hand them over to Life PR's fashion director who then personally escorts them to their premier seats. The seat allocations work on a general rule of thumb where buyers sit on one side of the catwalk and 'the fashion pack' on the other. Here the front row is reserved for fashion editors - the grande dames of the industry. Editors of less chic magazines are relegated to the second row, the third row is for assistants and hangers-on, whilst the true flotsam and jetsam must stand in the shadows at the back. At the end of the catwalk is the tiered 'pit' where a motley mob of photographers claim their fiercely guarded spots with a taped 'x' stuck to the floor. Everyone in this setting has a clearly defined role and position to fill. One glance at their location in the marquee instantly reveals their relative location in the industry's pecking order.

For many designers, the 'no-frills' surroundings found in the South Kensington tents are deemed too sterile to be suitable showcases for their collections. Increasingly, therefore, London Fashion Week is gaining a reputation for its frantic schedule in which the vogue for off-site shows means much of the week is spent traipsing between obscure venues. This travelling also means that incentives to attend have to be higher because time-space constraints no longer allow editors and press to get to each and every show. In turn, this has led to an increased rivalry between designers as they compete for the most select guest-list and the site with the greatest allure. Elspeth Gibson, for example, chose to show at ultra-hip Nobu, Swinging London's coolest restaurant; David Fielden opted for the refined Royal College of Music; Bella Freud the Café Royal; Matthew Williamson the intimate Milch Gallery - "there's no third row, so hopefully it will make people feel special" (quoted in Lane, 1998a:35), and for Maria Grachvogel, it was the trendy Atlantic Bar. It is through such locations that designers are able to communicate, firstly, their distinction from the humdrum convention of monochrome marquees, and secondly the unique and individual nature of their collections through venues that mobilise a sense of atmosphere, 'specialness' and meaningful identification. Unusual places, therefore, have come to be valuable mechanisms through which designers may establish themselves as extraordinary and detached from the standard practice of showing at the Natural History site.

"Like members of girl bands", writes Brown (1998:11), "each fashion capital has its own distinct personality". London, although exciting and iconoclastic, is also thought to be uncommercial and unreliable. This characterisation has grown, in part, out of the perceived amateurism of London Fashion Week, where shows, spread far-afield across town; often starting up to two hours late; famed for nasty scuffles over admittance, and known for gimmicks and parties rather than clothing and business concerns, have led to the dubious reputation of London as the "Lydia Bennet" of the fashion calendar (Lane, 1998a:35).

Reflecting this, the Italians made the unprecedented move of scheduling the beginning of Milan Fashion Week, to overlap with London by a matter of days. As many editors defected to the far more serious climes of Milan, London's screwball identity seemed to leave it languishing at the bottom of many international fashionista's diaries (and Paul Smith has shunned London for several years preferring to show in Paris, again a more organised and well respected venue). As the pull of Milan therefore eclipsed the latter days of London Fashion Week, we see the power of place mythologies at work, in this case, with the shunning of London as only a pit stop *en route* to what was imagined as the more heavyweight affairs of its Milanese contemporary.

Whilst London has therefore famously been branded by the influential American magazine, *Newsweek* as 'the coolest city on the planet', this description, does not extend to the whole of the nation because, claims the magazine, "we knew it would have been crazy to do so" (quoted in Eastham, 1998:15). In this conceptualisation of the nation, other cities and regions of the UK are relegated to being 'not London' (Taylor, 1991).

For example, the imaginary region of northern England has been socially spatialised as peripheral, industrial and the locus of working class images, "its rougher pleasures of the outdoors contrast with the more refined pleasures of the high culture of London and its commuter belt" (Bishop, 1991; Daniels, 1993; Gruffudd, 1991; Lowenthal, 1991; Pocock, 1981; Shields, 1991:229; Taylor, P., 1991). Upper England is thereby afforded the power of defining and delimiting its preferred national landscape and iconography, one in which the distinctive core area of the nation is imagined geographically as the 'Constable country' of those southern counties served by the metropolitan centre of London, and socially as being "essentially middle class" (Smith, G., 1988:21). Nairn (1988:191) has suggested that this national core has been built up around (as we saw in chapter three) the monarchy to form a type of "Crown Heartland" encompassing the Home Counties<sup>23</sup>. Here, 'home' denotes only a few counties in one corner of the country that sit in the royal shadow of Windsor and Buckingham Palace. The idea of there being an 'Upper' England points, therefore, to a social hierarchy underlying what is a deformed regionalisation of England. For as Johnson (1985:234-5) argues, a powerful, albeit essentially imagined, link has been constructed between social status, geographical location and the amplitude of one's national belonging. So that,

"It makes sense...to view British society as a series of concentric circles which are both social and geographical in their nature. To be at the epicentre - in the royal enclosure at Ascot or on the boards of the great merchant banks - is not just a matter of being socially and economically more upper class, but also in a sense more English. The real

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<sup>23</sup> Although what is interesting is that this national 'core' *can* extend beyond the geographical 'south' if these 'southern' features are to be found elsewhere. For example, the Cotswolds, the Chilterns and the Celtic fringes all possess a certain aristocratic and national cachet. As Horne (1970: 38) further explains "the English do not see rural villages as provincial or ancient cathedral towns that happen to be in the provinces. Things that are rural or ancient are at the very heart of Southern English snobberies, even if they occur in the North. Provincialism is to live in or near an industrial town to which the industrial revolution gave it its significant modern form". This contention is particularly relevant with regard to Mulberry, whose Mendip origins and identification with rural Somerset, although not geographically located in the Home Counties, are still very much lodged in the imagination as comprising the Crown Heartland.

outer groups are not just the poor, the black or the working class, but those furthest from the epicentre of the South-East". (Johnson, 1985:234-5)

Outside of London, Mulberry stores can only be found in York, Bath and, most recently of all, on Manchester's "positively fizzing" King Street, where the likes of Armani, DKNY and Vivienne Westwood have set up shop with Selfridges also locating close by (Barron, 1998a:15). This select number of Mulberry sites is a conscious attempt by the company at what Crewe and Lowe (1995:1886) have termed as the "restriction of growth", the idea that in order to be a truly special experience, Mulberry has gone about cultivating an exclusive identity through their scarcity of locations and their investment only in cities with strong fashion - and upmarket - identities. This exclusivity of location is also borne out in the Bond Street site, for Bond Street is an extremely prestigious address, loaded with upper class cachet and also host to other classic British labels such as Joseph, Caroline Charles, Nicole Farhi, as well as the national and iconic establishments of Sotheby's and neighbouring Savile Row. Mulberry's decision to locate on Bond Street comprises a fascinating mix of the socio-cultural and political-economic. As the ready-to-wear design director disclosed (above), the company's move from their former London headquarters in lesser-known St. Christopher's Place was deeply anticipatory, rather risky, and prior to Bond Street 'becoming so huge'. It is with this move that we see how Mulberry exploited the (relatively) cheap rental prices during a 'lull' in Bond Street's popularity, installing itself 'just at the right time' prior to Bond Street's latest incarnation as one of the most sought-after sites on the designer map and prior to rental leases rocketing skyward as a reflection of that renewed status. Not only, then, was this economic determinant influential in Mulberry's re-location but we also see how this was mediated through a series of intuitive and "subjective factors"

(Burgess and Wood, 1992: 94) in which local knowledge and hearsay, rather than standard geodemographic packages, also came into play.

In its site selection, Mulberry draws on the packaging of locales as a powerful tool in its own corporate projects and specifically, in its own construction of an aspirational, bourgeois vision of Anglo-Britishness. Mulberry's use of place, of roots and of exclusive locations, is very much about the delimitation and 'fixing' of identity and the restriction of membership to these places, in this case, through the variable of social status. This attachment to particular territorial locations is also about the increased need for senses of continuity, stability and cohesion in response and reaction to a disrupted and fragmented global space. Mulberry's eschewing of all things global - of perceived homogeneity, of the challenge to social hierarchies, of vulgar modern tastes, of the potential erosion of the nation and greatness of Britain - is therefore mobilised through its corporate projections of stable, rooted and above all, of placed, identities in a bid to counter the argument that "places are no longer the clear supports of our identity" (Morley and Robins, 1993:3).

### **5.9 Far From the High Fashion Crowd: Out on a limb with Paul Smith**

Mulberry, in its rather unprogressive and hidebound approach to place, is keen to prescribe associations between certain consumptional spaces and certain classes. In its choice of the formal arena and strict codes to be found ruling behaviour and appearance in Bond Street, the company has positioned itself as part and parcel of this landscape of bourgeois tastefulness. However, this correspondence between social groups and emergent landscapes has been, it is argued, somewhat overstated (Crewe and Lowe, 1995; Crewe and Beaverstock, 1998) and for example, the landscapes colonised by

those new taste communities that I discussed earlier in the chapter, display an inability to fit into these conventional class-based analyses. Indeed emerging "differentiated spaces of consumption" (Crewe and Lowe, 1995:1881) play a crucial part in the formulation of such communities, for unique, local sites are employed by these alternative groups to mobilise a sense of diversity and difference and to display their forms of stylistic competence. Therefore as Crewe and Lowe (1995:1893) suggest, rather than reading consumption spaces,

"as ones identifiable with fairly rigid and class-specific meanings, we prefer to see them as places characterised by a multiplicity of meanings which cross class divisions and coexist at the level of the individual". (Crewe and Lowe, 1995: 1893)

This rupturing of class-specific interpretations of place is particularly pertinent when examining the case of Paul Smith. As we have already seen, Smith is eager to take the processes of distinction to ever-new levels and to emphasise the extent of consumer individuality and degree of cultural capital. Paul Smith is about passing up the mass-produced commodities readily available on the UK high-street in favour of "something special, something different" (Smith quoted in Crewe and Beaverstock, 1998: 296). An important part of this process of differentiation is found in the locational politics of Paul Smith's national enterprise (figure 50). For in siting his retail outlets and offices in unique and slightly quirky places Smith is able to inform a clientele searching for unusual styles and alternatives to the conditioned masses.

What is interesting, is that, rather like we saw with Mulberry, Paul Smith uses a split-site strategy through which to operate his business, locating administrative head offices in both London and Nottingham. The obvious socio-cultural and political-economic

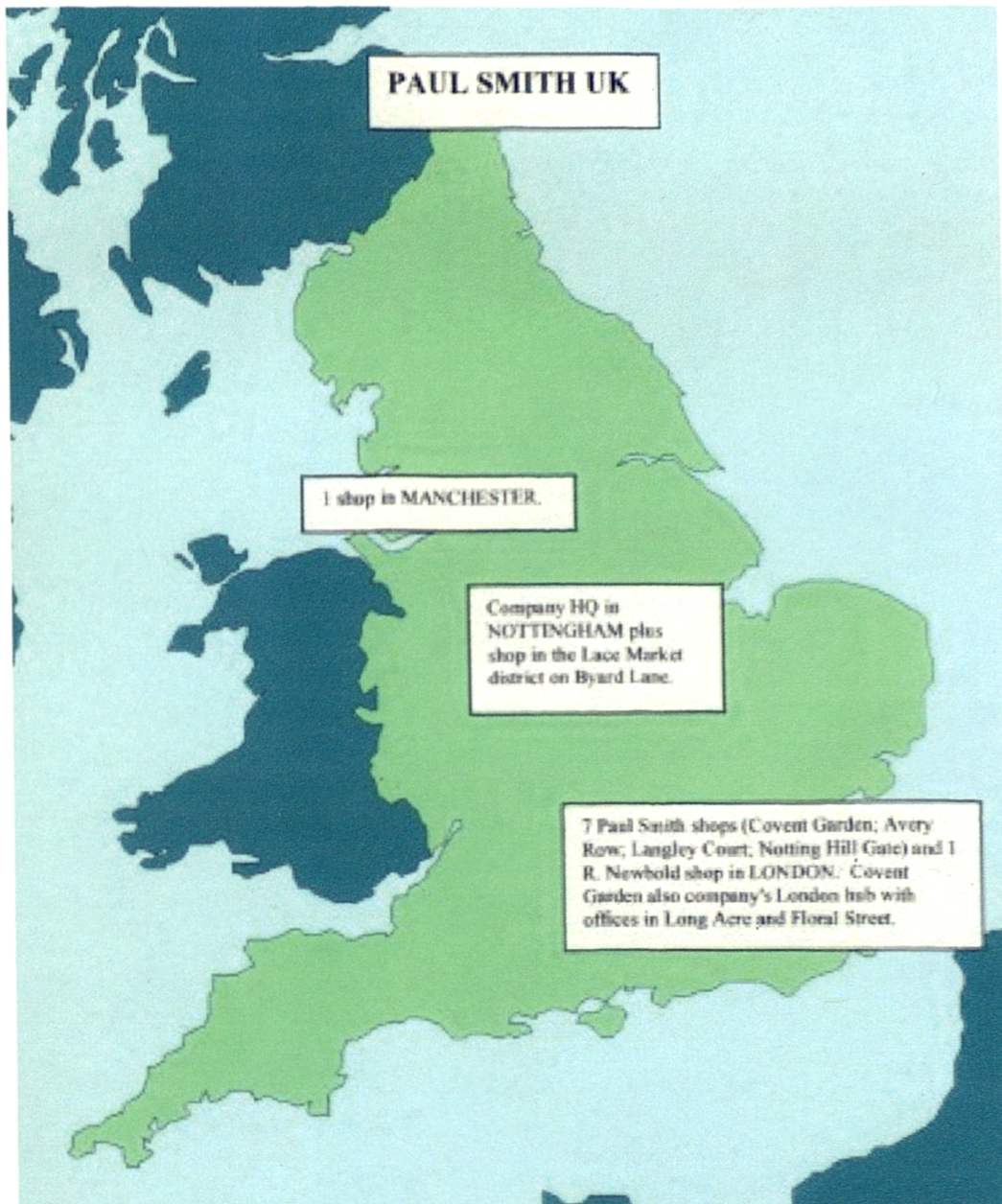


Figure 50: Map of key locations in Paul Smith's UK operation.

benefits in siting in London apply, yet what is fascinating is the way in which Paul Smith draws on a characterisation of London that starkly contrasts with the traditional and starchy representation imbued in Mulberry's choice of site and the corporate identification mobilised through it. Whilst Mulberry has chosen to identify with one of London's classic, blue-chip quarters found in the very centre of a commercial and business district, an area known for quality, craftsmanship and time-honoured national



values, Paul Smith has opted to place his business in far more avant-garde areas of London. Smith's Westbourne House outlet, for example, is in the suburbs of Notting Hill - by very definition a peripheral location away from the metropolitan hub - but still close enough to the markets of Portobello Road to inspire a chaotic and off-beat feel. As Tucker (1998: 144-6) explains,

"what makes the area fashionable is its high bohemian spirit mixed nowadays with everything which defines our own time: ethnic mixtures, freedom of relationships and open-minded communities.... It's a light-handed sense of style and fashion, allowing for very individual choice and making for a highly unconventional community. Difference, self-expression and an uncommon creativity provide the clues to this new fashionableness...it does not mean that you are obsessed with the banal clichés of traditional London, like black taxis and Victorian shops, but rather with whatever inspired Mike Leigh, Stephen Frears and Ken Loach". (Tucker, 1998:144-6)

Paul Smith therefore uses the place mythologies imbued in Notting Hill to forge his own creation of a bohemian spirit and a diversity of styles. Similarly, this use of the prevailing place mythology is again evident in Paul Smith's choice of Covent Garden (figure 51) as a key retail and administrative location for the company. Described as "an exotic fruit cocktail" (Tucker, 1998:86), Covent Garden, once a foremost commercial repository and trading centre for fruit and vegetable importers, served by the River Thames, and having one of the biggest permanent flower markets in Europe, is known for its carnival atmosphere and vibrancy<sup>24</sup>. Rather than being exclusive and élitist, Covent Garden is a space in which anything and anybody goes, from street theatre to pavement shiatsu, this is a transient and energetic quarter inhabited by plural

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<sup>24</sup> The recent redevelopment of the Royal Opera, located in Covent Garden (see appendix four) also adds to the vibrancy of this gentrifying area. The Royal Opera development also provides an intriguing sense of juxtaposition and the clashing of cultural influences - with the perceived 'refinement' of the *Royal Opera* being located in the heart of a bustling market area where 'barrow-boys' and street trading are still very much in evidence. Covent Garden is something of a marginal site therefore - with Paul Smith exploiting and drawing upon this marginality, mixing and mobility to great effect in its own corporate identifications with the area.



*Figure 51: The Paul Smith 'empire' on Floral Street, Covent Garden, London. Floral Street is home to Paul Smith menswear, womenswear and childrenswear outlets. Floral Street is located slightly off the 'beaten track', away from the main Covent Garden thoroughfare (see appendix four) - thus aiding Paul Smith's association with the avant-garde. Note also the architecture of the surrounding buildings. Many 'original' features, including tall, narrow warehouses have been retained and gentrified, adding to Covent Garden's unique atmosphere and sense of history.*

identities and styles. However, what is particularly interesting with Covent Garden is the defining role that Paul Smith has played within its recent development as a fashion quarter. For not only does Paul Smith take on board the unique sense of place ingrained in this area but he has also been very influential in shaping that sense of place and the cultural codes found there.

Paul Smith has a considerable physical presence in Covent Garden having colonised almost all of Floral Street with childrenswear, menswear and womenswear outlets, there is an R. Newbold store in neighbouring Langley Court, and wholesale showrooms and offices on Long Acre (see appendix four for detailed maps). The company has extended over the years to become absolutely synonymous with Covent Garden, Floral Street and

its environs. Now a flourishing area known for its directional, street styles operating from small outlets owned or leased by individual entrepreneurs, it was during the 1970s and with the decay of the original market, that Covent Garden fell into economic decline and environmental dereliction. In 1979, Paul Smith acquired an old banana warehouse from which to run his London operation, drawing on Covent Garden's, rich and cosmopolitan local history and unique architecture (original brick warehouses, cobbled streets and covered market place); its detachment from the soulless, central 'prime site', and also taking financial advantage of the depressed local property market, to pioneer a renewed set of place images that combined Covent Garden's colourful past with the innovation of contemporary creative industry. As one of the first nationally recognised and acclaimed companies to locate in Covent Garden, Paul Smith's reputation and endorsing of the area has been attributed as a factor in its regeneration (Billen, 1995), attracting further inward investment and establishing Covent Garden's unique identity for stylistic differentiation and creativity.

The use of, and contribution to, place-mythologies is a foremost strategy in the mobilisation of the Paul Smith corporate identity. Smith's continuing links with Nottingham, his hometown and the place in which his globally-extensive empire first began and subsequently grew out of, is testimony to the impact that the local environs have had upon Paul Smith himself, and the development of his organisation. He says (quoted in Jones, 1995c:23),

"It would have been very easy to move the whole business down to London, but I think that would have defeated the object, it's important to try and be true to your roots and to keep your feet on the ground, and when you look around Nottingham you can probably see why".  
(Smith in Jones, 1995c:23)

Certainly Paul Smith's personal affiliation with, and affinity to the Midlands and Nottingham in particular emerges in many guises throughout the company. Most notably, Nottingham's artistic and intellectual scene during the 1960s was to be the seedbed of Paul's design career and the inspiration that kick-started his first foray into the fashion industry. A turning point in Smith's life is documented as his discovery of the Bell Inn, Nottingham's focal point for painters, architects and art students (*Drapers Record*, 1998; Fitch, 1995; Frankel, 1998a; Holgate, 1998). It was here that he met his partner, Pauline Denyer, a Royal College of Art graduate who fuelled Paul's latent interest in art, design and fashion, encouraged him to start his own business, and initially designed, cut and made all the clothes before Paul gradually took over. As Smith (in *Drapers Record*, 1998: 19) recalls,

"I discovered the English pub and by chance the pub I found was The Bell Inn in Nottingham where all the art students used to hang out. This was really the influence on me as opposed to the textile industry around Nottingham which I wasn't aware of. But suddenly people were talking about Warhol, Kandinsky, Swinging London and stuff I hadn't heard of before. But what's been good is that I kept my business based in Nottingham. I live in London and that balance of being in the capital and then being in Nottingham is very grounding." (Smith in *Drapers Record*, 1998:19)

It is here that we see how the Paul Smith enterprise was - and still is - very much a product of its Nottingham locale. In particular, the company's continuing strength of association with Nottingham (known colloquially as the 'City of Fashion'), and the city's Lace Market, has been extremely important in offering an historical connection to the fashion and textile industry (see Crewe and Lowe, 1995; Crewe and Beaverstock, 1998). Following a period of regeneration (see Crewe and Forster, 1993; Crewe, 1996) the Lace Market, where Smith's original retail outlet remains (figure 52), has forged a

reputation as an extremely exciting quarter specialising in the sale of rare and small-batch fashion labels and one-off designs. As Crewe and Lowe (1995: 1890) argue,

"The distinguishing feature of the area is the sense of individuality and uniqueness which is far removed from the glitzy, highly controlled, placeless tone of the indoor malls which form the conventional retail core. It is dominated by small independent largely locally based designer stores with, on its fringes, exclusive international boutiques".  
(Crewe and Lowe, 1995:1890)

*Figure 52: Paul Smith outlet, Byard Lane, Nottingham. This is the 'original' Paul Smith store located in the city's 'trendy' Hockley area. The shop (on the right of the picture), located in a shadowy alley, is small and secluded - only 'those in the know', or those autodidacts prepared to stray from the main commercial hub and to seek out - and stumble upon - more unusual brands would discover this store.*



This positioning of the Lace Market, physically, away from the retail core of the city in Hockley (see appendix five for detailed map) and symbolically, aside from the conventions of mainstream fashion, mark this site out as a space upon which alternative

taste communities converge. Independent stores offer an individual and personalised service; a high degree of customer care, and attention to detail in terms of the staging and presentation of goods. The success of retailing in Hockley relies in part therefore on the "indirect commodification" (Crewe and Lowe, 1995: 1890) of products via the liberal atmosphere and trendy images of stores found there, as well as the 'cool' personnel who work in them. It is this creation of the 'special' consumer experience, as we have already seen (in chapter four), in which Paul Smith excels. Smith runs his global business as if it were a corner shop and "understands the importance of good service, good presentation and good surroundings as well as good produce" (Jones, 1995c: 23). Furthermore, these socio-cultural factors are underpinned by an economic system of organisation peculiar to the Lace Market and "rarely found outside certain European centres of fashion and which is perhaps unique in the British context" (Crewe and Beaverstock, 1998:296). A localised system of business linkages and agglomeration economies enable the retailers found in the Lace Market to be at the very 'cutting edge' of fashion. For the Market is inhabited by what Purvis has termed as "flexible pop fashion designers" (1996:118), characterised by their post-Fordist working practices and their ability to create and occupy their own market niches because they are small, informal and committed more to the production of exceptional clothing than to cut-throat profit maximisation. Small batch availability, a rapid response to constantly changing trends, local sourcing, short lead times and a high market position (see Crewe and Beaverstock, 1998) place the Lace Market retailers far ahead of their middle-market rivals in trend-setting terms. Thus, we find that the maintenance of Hockley's trendy image and its popularity amongst a diverse range of consumers - the student looking for cheap, yet stylish, clothes; the second-hand bargain hunter after retro originals; the designer shopper - is reliant as much on the flexibly-specialised systems of production

and accompanying economic organisation in place there, as the image-making mythologies, aesthetic symbolism and historical references also at work. So we see that Nottingham's Lace Market provides an example of what Crewe and Beaverstock (1998:295) have termed as the "cultural-economic synergy" to be found in the localised spaces of cultural industry. This synergy is absolutely crucial, both in the construction of an individualised and personalised consumption experience, and in the conjoined creation of a vibrant, inclusionary and interesting consumption place.

More widely, Paul Smith's avant-garde choices of corporate location go some way in shattering the notion that the bourgeoisie have a monopoly on access to, and the flaunting of, taste and tastefulness. Contrary to Hebdige (1988:119) who argues that "taste functions as a marker between the social classes, where 'good taste' is inscribed above a door which is reserved for 'Members Only'", this chapter has looked at how such linkages between good taste and high social class are increasingly contested, forming only part of what are the much more complex - and diverse - (class) narratives of British fashion. This chapter has examined the élitist fashion tradition in which the stuffy, snobbish images of British high society and the privileged Home County-set still inhabit a significant niche in the geographical imaginings of certain consumer fractions and in the strategies of certain aspirational fashion brands. However, alongside these enduring codes in which British fashion is seen as reproducing a banal vision of Britain in terms of old world values, of a rural nation and of a sovereign state (refer to chapter three and sections 3.2 and 3.4 in particular), this chapter has also examined how competing systems of taste, style and dressing simultaneously inhabit the British fashion scene. Therefore, good taste - and, indeed, 'good' national citizenship - is not necessarily a class privilege. As Hansen (2000: 271) argues, "being poor and being a

discriminating consumer are not mutually exclusive". This emerging consumer discrimination; the ironic techniques of kitsch, juxtaposition and the surreal, as well as the 'differentiated spaces' of consumption that characterise emerging 'taste communities', suggest that the essentialising of British sartorial identity in terms of class aspiration and of aristocratic lifestyling (think back, for example, to 'The Cutting Edge' exhibition, section 1.5) has ignored more diverse approaches to national style and to the 'narratives of ambiguity' that characterise it. In the chapter that follows I look at these diversifying consumptional communities and landscapes still further. In exploring the gendering of British fashion, chapter six examines what has been the androcentric essence of the aspirational British 'look' and how, through the emerging techniques of autodidacticism and the transforming nature of the marketplace that I have discussed here, (and over the course of the thesis more generally) the gendering of Britishness and of British fashion embraces a far more dynamic and diverse set of identities than those drawn around the somewhat 'false dichotomies' of the country gent and his leisured lady.



## CHAPTER SIX

### Who Wears the Trousers? Fashion, nation, gender

#### 6.1 Britishness and Blokeyness: Dichotomies of nation

According to Franklin (1996:17) British style is widely perceived as "a particularly blokey look". In this view, the British male is dressed for action, reflecting a clear imperial legacy in which his female alter ego is merely "lieutenant to the revved up [male] commanders". These sartorial identities reflect - and indeed mobilise - an androcentric vision of the nation, where females have popularly been cast in supportive or decorative roles (recall the 'vicarious ostentation' discussed in chapter two), subordinate to those country gents, glorious sportsmen and heroic colonialists who, as we have already seen in previous chapters, dominate personifications of Britishness around the globe. This asymmetric gender balance perpetuates an idea of nationness that privileges "masculinised memory, masculinised humiliation, masculinised hope" (Enloe, 1989:44) and, in so doing, consequently marginalises, and even excludes, women from the national picture. In this chapter, I explore the institutionalisation of this gender fracture in British identity by drawing on cases taken from the British fashion industry and specifically from Mulberry, from Paul Smith and from the British fashion press. I suggest that the Cartesian separation between male/female, masculine/feminine and the priorities with which each have become normatively attached are somewhat 'false dichotomies' (Jackson, 1991; Jackson and Holbrook, 1995; Keith and Pile, 1993; Rutherford, 1990) and oversimplify what we shall see as the complex and often contradictory relations of gender, nation and their commodification by cultural industry.

Notions of 'ideal' national citizens have centred on the molecular - and patriarchal - family unit, an 'ideal' mobilised and bolstered in the commercial sphere of consumption known for its essentialising of identities, for stereotyping and its love of the cliché (Leiss *et al*, 1986; McClintock, 1995; Myers, 1986; Williamson, 1988). However, with what Jackson (1995: 108) coins "the opening up" of consumption spaces, these polarised certainties are ever more problematic and new terms have been set for a far more diverse range of consumptive identities in which "transgressive sexualities and blurred gender identities are the latest fashion"<sup>25</sup>. Yet, whilst this latest tendency towards the commodification of 'inbetweenness' recognises the hybrid nature of cultural identities and their sexual and gender relations, it does not necessarily signal an end to the existing power structure that privileges the heterosexual male. For, as we shall see over the course of the chapter, the emergence of plural and ambiguous identities - of, for example, those identities coined by the British style press as 'ladettes' and as 'new man' - at once disrupt the rather crude dichotomies of traditional gender constructs, yet simultaneously, these same ambiguities are being "co-opted into the service of patriarchy" (Chapman, 1988:235) and are thereby also instrumental in new forms of oppression and the continued preservation of male gender dominance.

A wide literature suggests that in contexts as diverse as Iran (DeGroot, 1993), Bengal (Sen, 1993), India (Radhakrishnan, 1992), South Africa (McClintock, 1993), Japan (Hogan, 1999) and Australia (Hogan, 1999; Magarey *et al*, 1993), gender is mobilised in the discourses of national identity. As McClintock (1995: 353) argues,

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<sup>25</sup> This blurring, although the latest fashion during the mid- to late 1990s, is not entirely new. See for example, the *garçonnes* of the 1920s (section 2.7).

"All nations depend on powerful constructions of gender. Despite many nationalists' ideological investment in the idea of popular *unity*, nations have historically amounted to the sanctioned institutionalization of gender *difference*". (McClintock, 1995:353)

Nationalism cannot begin to be understood without first subscribing to a theory of gender power. This power is typically constructed around a patriarchal vision in which heterosexual men assume a metonymic role and are granted significantly more agency than those 'Others' outside of, or different to, the 'norm'. As Anderson (1991 [1983]) argues, the nation is imagined as fraternal and is symbolised by the citizen-soldier, the epitome of macho, dynamic masculinity whose primary objective is the defence and/or promotion of the (female) nation. This militaristic trope is especially pertinent in the gendering of what is popularly imagined as the British 'look'. As I discussed in chapter four (section 4.1), British style has long been associated with a 'wardrobe of conquest'. Military uniforms, ceremonial wear and their strict lores of appearance were key markers of Britishness in the national project of early twentieth century imperial expansion. This 'wardrobe' was also, however, implicitly gendered with the imperial British male dressing in the authoritative and aggressive uniforms of military tradition, the legacy of which still lives on today. As Franklin (1996: 163) describes,

"Feminine styles are body hugging, revealing and flamboyant, while men, from city banker to corporate executive, unanimously favour the ubiquitous suit, modelled on a traditional fighting uniform. With streamlined silhouettes, small crests, piping and top collar folded back to make a lapel, modern day menswear is little more than a depiction of civilian infantry".  
(Franklin, 1996: 163)

Mulberry is a company that very much pushes such a "strongly masculine, traditional image" in its commercial contrivances (Netherwood, 1990: 11). It identifies particularly strongly with the dress of the British military male. Roger Saul, for example, is an avid

collector of Victorian military uniforms and much of his design inspiration comes from the regalia and detailing of Britain's military past. Typical Mulberry customers are, according to Netherwood (1990: 11), "English gentlemen, Sandhurst officers, old and not-so-old boys" who indulge in Mulberry's fastidious attention to the time-honoured dictates of traditional British gentlemen's dressing. "Trousers have buttons, never zips; panama hats have ridges not dents and cologne bottles have glass stoppers" (Netherwood, 1990: 11).

It is through these masculine, and masculinist, constructions, (seen here in the banal contrivances of Mulberry's gendered national imagery) that a dichotomy - a national 'us' and a national 'them' - is reproduced in which the stability and endurance of the nation is of primary concern. To this end, non-reproductive sexualities are marginalised, even regarded as abhorrent, and placed far beyond the nation's borders in a bid to naturalise certain gender roles and sexualities in opposition to those 'abnormal' and 'improper' identities believed to pose a threat to national survival, national values and national order. Nationhood, then, is couched firmly in a familial ideal and shaped around the evolutionary Family of Man. This is the 'natural' scheme of things through which Britain's national gender narrative is organised and manifested (McClintock, 1995; Sharp, 1996). It is a hierarchy in which women's citizenship in the nation is mediated solely through their relationships as wives and mothers with men. Mulberry propagates this gender fracture. An advertising feature for the Mulberry womenswear collection, for example, places women firmly in the role of mother, the 'success' of a prototype women's design being measured with the question "could I bend down easily and tie my two-year-old's shoe laces?" (Brogan, 1990: no pagination).

Therefore whilst men enable and enact the nation, women are symbolic of it and are confined to the domestic and private sphere of the home. As McClintock (1995: 354-359) argues,

"All too often in male nationalisms, gender difference between women and men serves to symbolically define the limits of national difference and power between men. Excluded from direct action as national citizens, women are subsumed symbolically into the national body politic as its boundary and metaphoric limit.... Women are typically constructed as the symbolic bearers of the nation, but are denied any direct relation to national agency.... Women are represented as the atavistic and authentic body of national tradition (inert, backward-looking and natural), embodying nationalism's conservative principle of continuity. Men, by contrast, represent the progressive agent of national modernity". (McClintock, 1995: 345-9)

In this portrait of nationhood drawn around a binary logic between men and women and their attendant codes of 'appropriate' masculinity and femininity, we see a complete disregard for 'transgressive' sexual and gender identities. Those failing to conform to the national standard are rendered invisible and without a place in this particular national schema. The binary logic that we see here is therefore employed as a restrictive mechanism, denoting a system of domination (Grosz, 1989; Longhurst, 1997) that fashion's a "national community in somebody's, but not everybody's image" (Enloe, 1993:250). The rhetoric and iconography of nation produces, manifests and very much sanctions, this insider/outsider dictate (Yuval-Davis and Anthias, 1989). For example, metaphorical depictions of the nation as a 'motherland' or as a 'national family', depend on the prior naturalising of female subordination and of its inextricable attachment to what is characterised as 'protective' or 'constraining' domestic spaces. National symbols such as Britannia, Marianne and Liberty connect women with abstract and mythological figures (Monk, 1992) that both bear little real relation to individual women and that also

help forge a link between women and nature (and men and culture). As Lloyd argues (1993:2),

"from the beginnings of philosophical thought, femaleness was symbolically associated with what Reason supposedly left behind - the dark powers of the earth goddesses, immersion in unknown forces associated with mysterious powers". (Lloyd, 1993: 2)

The metaphor of 'Mother Earth' that we see here underscores the gender imbalances of nation and nationhood. For example, it is common for cultural representations to employ women, and particularly women's bodies, as terrain and as exotic landscapes to be mapped and appropriated (Goodrum, forthcoming; Nash, 1993; 1996; Rose, 1992; 1993). The feminised landscape is thereby positioned submissively as something to be raped, tamed and possessed by man. Rose (1993: 98-99) writes that, the empowered masculine gaze,

"sees a feminine body which requires interpreting by the cultured knowledgeable look; something to own, and something to give pleasure. The same sense of visual power as well as pleasure is at work as the eye traverses both field and flesh: the masculine gaze is of knowledge and desire". (Rose, 1993: 98-99)

The power of men to stare at women, then, reinforces women's objectification. Whilst the male is 'monarch-of-all-he-surveys' (Pratt, M-L., 1992), conquerer and chief, women, uncontrolled, emotional and sensual are to be viewed with fear and in need of discipline and domesticating. The mind, masculinity, rationality and Sameness are given priority over the body, femininity, irrationality and Otherness. In short, man is the negation of everything signposted as feminine (Blomley, 1996; Segal, 1990). Mind is privileged over body, just as men are privileged over women. As Kirby (1992: 12-13) argues,

"Although it is granted that Man has a body, it is merely as an object that he grasps, penetrates, comprehends and ultimately transcends. As his companion and complement, Woman *is* the body. She remains stuck in the primeval ooze of Nature's sticky immanence, a victim of the vagaries of her emotions, a creature who can't think straight as a consequence." (Kirby, 1992: 12-13)

What we are seeing here is an example of the dominant visual regime of heterosexual masculinism. Whilst "women appear", says Berger (1972: 47) "men act". So we see how nationhood relies very heavily on binary reproductions of gender, reproductions that operate through exclusionary discourses and that set limits to national difference and national power in terms of sanctioned sexualities and gender behaviours. In the following discussion, I explore how these strictly defined characterisations of gender identity - of the female nurturer and the male warrior - are likewise particularly pertinent to the world of fashion. For, just like national identity, fashion relies extensively on the defining of gender boundaries and the coding of what constitutes masculine and feminine traits. As Craik (1994: 44-63) argues,

"if sex is determined by biology, then gender is learned and acquired as a set of social trainings about how female bodies behave.... Social and sexual identity is lodged in the way the body is worn. Gender - especially femininity - is worn through clothes". (Craik, 1994: 44-63)

*Figure 53: Methodology Box  
Gender makes a difference*

**Gender Makes a Difference: The social relations of interviewing**

"The conventional assumption that the researcher is a disembodied, rational, sexually indifferent subject - a mind unlocated in space, time or constitutive interrelationships with others, is a status normally attributed only to angels" (Grosz, 1986: 199).

This notion of gender as a social training is also helpful in thinking about research methodology. Here I discuss some of the ways my own (gendered) identity impacted upon my field relations and on the interview process in particular. This account of my experiences in interviewing corporate élites suggests that the 'classic' gender dichotomy of superior male versus

subordinate female (as outlined here in section 6.1) vastly oversimplifies the nuances of gender as a social characteristic *and* the complexities of interview relations as unique and as socially constructed encounters.

L. McDowell (1992; 1998) argues that when conducting interview-based research, gender makes a difference. Similarly Turner and Martin (1984: 271) maintain that the "social characteristics of an interviewer and a respondent, such as age, race and sex, are significant during their brief encounter: different pairings have different meanings and evoke different cultural norms and stereotypes that influence the opinions and feelings expressed by respondents".

With regard to my own interview-based research these social characteristics - my identity as a young, white, female - doubtless had some effect on the nature of, and knowledge generated from, the corporate interviews that I conducted. However, following Schoenberger (1992), I am not sure precisely *what* difference these characteristics actually had or, indeed, how this difference might be quantified.

Since I chose to conduct open-ended interviews, my interview schedule was very loosely structured so that I could navigate my way around a prepared set of topics in a conversational manner, expanding on certain themes or on additional themes as these came up in conversation. Most of these interviews were with corporate executives who had very specific areas of specialisation within their organisation (dealing for example only with production, marketing, PR, exports etc). This meant that no two interviews were alike and that, in general, I asked very different questions to each of my different interviewees. The esoteric nature of each of my interviews therefore means it is difficult to compare and to contrast the responses of interviewees and to fathom the kinds of effects that different pairings in terms of the social characteristics and demographics of - and between - those interviewed, and myself as interviewer, had.

However, it is in this difficulty over the comparison and contrasting of the interviews I conducted that I think we still do find several interesting and important issues. As McDowell argues, when interviewing corporate élites (1998: 2138) "the ideal to aim for is to try and ask the same questions in the same way so as to produce comparable data. But...in practise this seems impossible". It is here that we see how there is something of a shortfall between interviewing in theory and doing interviews in practise. In turn, however, this shortfall tells us something about the nature of the peoples and the places under research. In particular - and with regard to my own interviewing experiences - it suggests that rather than assuming the role of rational economic man, my own identity as a social being - and the relationship I developed with my interviewee as that social being - did shape the interview. I have, for example, already examined (in figure 24) how my student class impacted on my ability to get my foot in the door. Once in, I also suspect my student status, coupled with my identity as a female in my mid-twenties meant the very powerful, self-assured people I was interviewing felt I posed little threat to themselves or their wider organisation. Indeed, I think this point is borne out, in part, through the changing relationship that I had with almost all of my interviewees as the interview process progressed: whilst most proved exceedingly difficult to set up initial meetings with, requiring innumerable telephone calls, messages, faxes and negotiations, during the interview itself, my interviewees were, without exception, keen to assist me (often giving me up to two hours of their time and providing 'extras' such as tours of shops, factories and literature to take away). Post-interview, too, my non-threatening young, female persona also, I think, influenced the almost blasé attitude that the respondents had to the verifying and vetoing of interview transcripts. The low priority that the respondents gave to perusing and checking the contents of these transcripts, and the lack of concern they almost unanimously expressed over them, suggests that, once we had met 'in person', I became less of an unknown entity and less threatening.

As a result of my initial problems and struggles with access (figure 24), I was conscious that, in order to maintain access and to foster good field relations, I should present a non-threatening identity when conducting my interviews. To this end, I found myself 'tailoring' each interview according to the social characteristics of each interviewee. On several occasions, for example, with older, well-respected male figures, I seemed to foster what McDowell, (1998: 2138) terms as the "classic" male-female relationship whereby these male figures played an almost paternal role, offering me advice and guidance on the fashion industry and imparting their years of acquired wisdom. In other cases, with rather brusque, senior female management, I tried to be as efficient and as authoritative as possible. With several younger interviewees, I found that I developed a sense of camaraderie. Our similarity in ages, backgrounds and their own student



experiences being a none-too-distant memory, they empathised with who I was and what I was doing. Each interview that I conducted was therefore very different - but different, not only because of the esoteric topics under discussion in each one - but also because of the unique dynamics each pairing brought in terms of the social characteristics of - and between - interviewer/interviewee.

## **6.2 A 'Stubbornly Fixed' Vocabulary: Masculinity and femininity in fashion**

As communicators of cultural identity, fashion and the fashion industry are important intermediaries in the construction and mobilisation of 'correct' forms of masculinity and femininity (think back to the 'S-bend' fashions I discussed in section 2.7 and the physical and social restrictions these fashions imposed upon women). The (female) body, for example, is seen by the fashion industry as a canvas through which social relations might discursively be produced and inscribed. Normatively these social relations have cast consumption, and in particular, the consumption of fashionable clothing, to be very much a female domain (Blomley, 1996; Craik, 1994; Domosh, 1996; Wilson, 1985) so that "fashion is presumed a female preoccupation" (Polhemus and Procter, 1978:1). As we saw in chapters one and two, the feminisation of fashion by academics and by society at large, has operated both to trivialise the study of fashion and to deride those 'dupes' who are its followers. Indeed the prevailing attitude is one set to impugn and belittle almost everything to do with fashion. Women, irrational, unknowing and faddish, are viewed as the victims of this industry that preys upon unsuspecting consumers. Apparently oblivious to the nefarious ploys of male producers and authority figures, women are easily seduced by the 'magic' of the consumptive sphere and assume a passive role as mere clothes-horses for the vicarious display of male status. For so long, therefore, fashion has been denigrated for the physical and ideological restriction and exploitation of women (Featherstone, 1991b; Franklin, 1996; Ko, 1997; Motz, 1983; Wallerstein, 1998) and sneered at as a superficial arena of "false

consciousness" (Wilson, 1985: 232). In contrast, 'real' men, so the rhetoric goes, are uninterested in, or able to resist, the "consumerist poison of fashion" (Wilson, 1985: 237) so that in this dualistic portrayal of clothing culture, manliness is entirely incompatible with the 'girlie' pursuits of shopping, following fashion and suffering in the name of style. As Craik (1994: 176) tells us,

"men's fashion takes the form of a set of denials that include the following propositions: that there is no men's fashion; that men dress for fit and comfort, rather than for style; that women dress men and buy clothes for men; that men who dress up are peculiar (one way or another); that men do not notice clothes, and that most men have not been duped into the endless pursuit of seasonal fads". (Craik, 1994: 176)

What we are seeing here is the way in which men have traditionally come to be fashionless, dressing in sombre, functional clothing to reflect and enhance their primary role as 'breadwinner' and also to assert their masculinity through the shunning of frivolous, narcissistic - and thereby feminine - fashion. As Spencer (1992: 40-1) argues, the Great British Male (GBM) is notoriously badly dressed,

"An unpleasant mac, a dowdy overcoat, a shaggy jumper and slacks for weekends, an insistence on dour colours from the sludge spectrum unique to GBM, a sullen resistance to sock-changing.... Conformity and solidarity rule alongside mediocrity of design and material." (Spencer, 1992: 40-1)

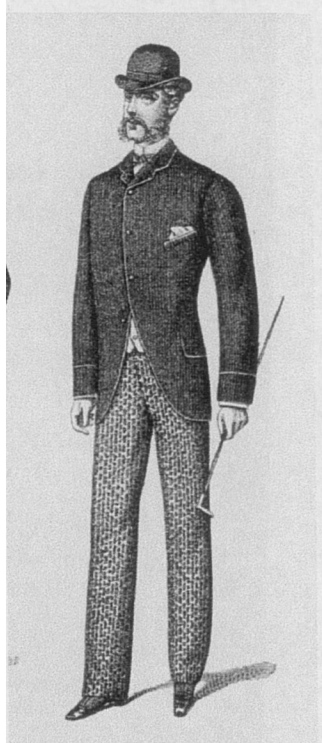
In this dualistic view of male producer/female consumer any attempt at expressive or decorative male fashion has been confined to very particular groups and subcultures, to those men whose effeminate consumption habits mark them out as 'queer' and as transgressing mainstream male mores (Almond, 1988; Cosgrove, S., 1989; Craik, 1994; Kohn, 1989; Lloyd, D., 1988). For example, homosexual males, dandies, fops, artistes and some ethnic minorities are, in their 'abnormal' interest in clothing, decoration and

the world of style, often labelled 'degenerate', emasculated, ridiculed and exoticised as the 'Other' to a white, heterosexual, masculine norm. As Paul Smith (in Frankel 1998a: 20), by his own admission every bit the dandy, chronicles,

"I had a hand-made, pale-pink, single breasted suit and red python boots. Old men used to come up to me in the street and shout: 'Look at you! You look like a woman! You should be put in a dress! I fought the war for people like you!'"

(Smith in Frankel, 1998a: 20)

*Figure 54: A City of London clerk c. 1900*



What is particularly fascinating in this reaction to Smith's 'effeminate' appearance, is the way in which sartorial Othering is attached to a national discourse and how unspectacular male dress has been instrumental in negotiating a sense of 'proper' British masculinity. To return once more to the British imperial project of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Breward (1999) looks at the nationalised significance

encoded in the dress of City of London clerks (figure 54). These clerks were the embodiment of the professional British male and were encouraged to maintain a contained, hygienic and controlled appearance in opposition to the threat from uncivilised, indolent, subversive and darkly exotic colonial subjects. The City clerk's uniform therefore comprised "crisp linen collars, or the wipe-clean xylonite alternatives, and bright neat sporting ties in profusion represented a freshness distinct from the confusion of the dockside and East End dress" (Breward, 1999: 245). Respectability and good national citizenship was therefore ensconced in a visual refusal of gender ambiguity. Neatness and conformity in male dress reflected the essence of imperial identities in which masculine and feminine traits were diametrically opposed.

This equation of consumption with women (and the related exclusion of men from the consumptive sphere) remains very much in evidence today. As Hebdige (1988:86; Carter, 1979) explains, in the contemporary commercial arena, "the object is split, janus-like, into its two opposed aspects: his and hers. His: functional, scientific, useful. Hers: decorative, aesthetic, gratifying". This essentialising of gender identities within creative industry has led to the persistence of what Nixon (1996: 32) argues is a "stubbornly fixed vocabulary for reading clothes" and such rigidity has left little room for the exploration of ambiguous or more nuanced understandings of masculinity and femininity. Thus we find that in the world of fashion an androcentric dictate still prevails, positing male heterosexuality to be a universal standard whilst simultaneously feminising 'other' masculinities and relegating women - an homogeneous group devoid of any internal differences - as accessories to male desire. This is what Chapman (1988: 227) argues "is the classic dualism endemic to patriarchal thinking", one that provides "a masculine counterpoint - the macho and the wimp - to the feminine duo of the

madonna and the whore". In the section that follows I explore this binary logic still further by examining the case of Mulberry and the gender relations that are reproduced across a range of its products and promotional narratives. For Mulberry man and Mulberry woman are illustrative of the power and persistence of an imperial legacy in which the polarised codes and behaviours of masculinity and femininity are stringently maintained. This is part of a national project, one where 'proper' Britishness is equated with white male heterosexual supremacy - a notion that we have seen coined by Franklin (1996:17) as the traditionally British "blokey"<sup>26</sup> look". She (1996: 101) elaborates,

"Popular reporting makes much of those men who attempt to cross dress. How can they be real men if they like women's clothes...? The uniform of the weak, fragile and politically inferior should not be coveted by the ruling gender. (Franklin, 1996: 101)

### **6.3 Gender In Production: Mulberry man and Mulberry woman**

We have already seen in chapter three (section 3.4) how fashion is an important, yet under-explored, vehicle in the daily reproduction of nationness - of 'banal nationalism' - and it is here, in fashion's creative renderings of masculinity and femininity that the power and significance of this daily buttressing fully emerges. The asymmetrical balance of gender power, as seen in the foregoing discussion, is a product of the constant repetition of essentialised identities, a repetition that can be found in the discourses of the commercial world, and most pertinently, in the 'banal' symbols of Britishness produced and propagated by iconic national fashion organisations. As Sharp (1996: 98) explains,

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<sup>26</sup> Yet this term also has a class referent and in some ways is more in tune with Paul Smith's idea of a cheeky, witty masculinity and of being 'one-of-the-lads', than Mulberry's stiff-upper-lip

"like national identity, gendered identity takes on its apparently 'natural' presence through the repeated performance of gender norms. In the performance of identity in everyday life, the two identifications converge. The symbols of nationalism are not gender neutral but in enforcing a national norm, they implicitly or explicitly construct a set of gendered norms." (Sharp, 1996: 98)

Here we see how the 'norm' of androcentric hegemony has come into being through an habitual and daily ritualisation. Rather than arising from some culturally distinct essence, masculinist claims to the nation are made 'natural' through the repeated performance of dichotomous gender relations. Nowhere is this repetition more endemic - more 'everyday' - than in the case of Mulberry and its corporate 'take' on gender. For across its commodity chains we find specific gender relations in production. In keeping with the general thrust of its corporate identity, these relations are imbued with imperialistic tropes and offer up a vastly simplified picture of male and female identity that, as we shall see in the following discussion, is anchored around a stable set of icons that insist on placing women firmly in the worlds of leisure and/or domestic labour, and men in the worlds of work and/or action-packed endeavour. It is indeed a 'stubbornly fixed' construction of gender and, as a representation of aspirational Britishness, it is also one that is in need of critical consideration.

Mulberry's flagship store on Bond Street provides a rich set of these heavily gendered texts. In particular the physical organisation of this store tells us much about the ideological ordering of gender power and how the Mulberry corporate lifestyle is one built with an androcentric agenda - one of Jackson's (1991: 210) "spatial structures that support and maintain [masculinity's] dominant forms". Just as the first department stores of the nineteenth century were founded on the socially perceived need for

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version of the British male.

appropriately gendered spaces of consumption - for department stores to be feminised in order to provide a commercial yet suitably 'private' environment in which females could 'safely' consume (Blomley, 1996; Domosh, 1996; Glennie and Thrift, 1996) - so we find that these same strictly divided gender distinctions persist in the spatial negotiations of Mulberry's present retail site on Bond Street. Most obviously, Mulberry has created two quite separate zones for their male and female clientele. The men's department is located on the ground floor along with leather accessories and luggage, whilst women's fashion is to be found upstairs on the first floor alongside the Mulberry Home interiors range. This particular assemblage of Mulberry products is extremely significant, since it enforces the link on the one hand with women and the domestic sphere and on the other, with men and the more intrepid pursuits of travel and exploration. On first entering the store we encounter a masculine world enabled through darker, more subdued and angular fittings and fixtures - an environment encoded with "confident, solid, chunky masculinity" (Reekie, 1987: 308; 1993). This is the public and prioritised face of Mulberry, one where male clothing is displayed cheek by jowl with the paraphernalia of the seasoned traveller - that traveller, in Mulberry's gendered corporate politics, being essentially male and exuding a straightforward image of no-nonsense masculinity structured around solid masculine caricatures such as 'the collector' or 'the sporting hero' (Mort, 1996). The ground floor location still further institutionalises the gender imbalance, for it positions the Mulberry male at the threshold of the store, in close proximity to the vagaries and vulgarities of the street. The flip side, of course, to this male spatial dominance, is the attendant subordination of women, in that their specialist department is demoted to a secluded cloister tucked away in the more private - more feminine - recesses of the first floor, a bid that Reekie (1987:297) suggests is to make this female space "more seductively comfortable than men's".

So we see that Mulberry promotes a set of gendered discourses in its store design, layout and décor that maintains a lingering association with the classic imperial dualism of male/female. Mulberry man is the very quintessence of 'old man' "characterised by his abhorrence of all things female", emotionally illiterate and harking back to the days when 'men were men' (Chapman,1988: 227). He is the "Classic Macho" and as Chapman (1988: 227) argues is,

*"representative of traditional armour-plated masculinity from Bogart to Bronson, a whole panoply of atomised and paranoid manhood wreaking order through destruction; its apotheosis is the figure of Rambo, bare-chested and alone, wading through the Vietcong swamp, with not even a tube of insect repellent for comfort".*  
(Chapman, 1988: 227)

Certainly this notion of white, heterosexual machismo, and its civilising imperative, remains a compelling force throughout Mulberry's gendered formations of identity. Indeed it is the likes of Mulberry and its institutional techniques of imperialist nostalgia that have engendered a kind of "born-again Indiana Jones" style vocabulary in which "fantasies about the exploits of imperial heroes continue, despite everything, to exert a powerful influence in the public sphere" (Driver, 1993: 615). Whilst such neo-colonial tropes are riddled with "painful inadequacies" (Driver, 1993: 615) - most pertinently in their "misbegotten commercialization" (McClintock, 1995: 14-15) of the fracture between hard-line masculinity and soft-soaping femininity - Mulberry still exploits these romanticised gender politics as both corporate and national 'ideals'. The Mulberry world is therefore one inhabited solely by young, healthy, white, heterosexual couples and remains untainted by such impropriety and nationalist taboos as racial mixing or homosexuality.



Mulberry's entourage of imperial binaries - of male/female; metropolis/colony; centre/periphery; self/other - are also to be viewed in much of the company's product portfolio and accompanying promotional literature. For example, the 1990-1991 edition of *Mulberry Life* employs an imperialistic voice, boasting in a full-page spread,

"Here We Go Round the Mulberry World:

The ever expanding world of Mulberry is flourishing further and further away from its roots in Somerset, England." *(Mulberry Life, Autumn/Winter 1990-1)*

It is here, in the proprietorial claims to a unitary 'Mulberry world' that we see what McClintock (1995: 354) has termed as the rhetoric of "male nationalism", a nationalism that propels itself outward from an Anglo-centric hub to appropriate those far-flung,

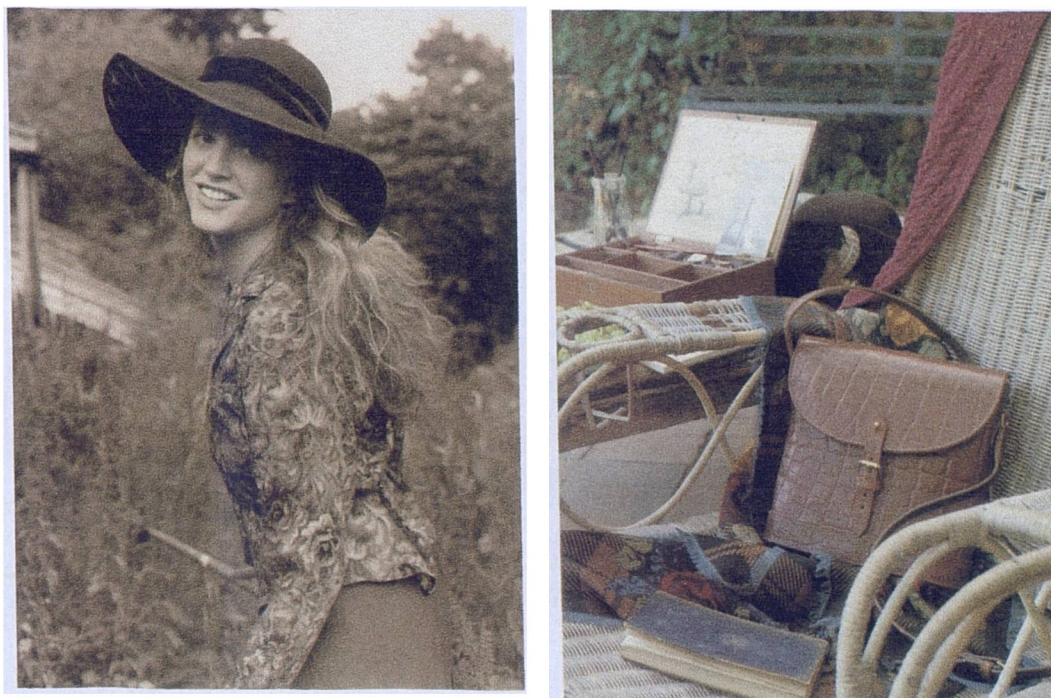


*Figure 55: Mulberry's 'Gentleman At Home' (left) and 'Gentleman Abroad' (right) collections. The gent pictured here 'at home' is the very quintessence of the Anglo-British squire, a powerful symbol of an imagined British ideal. Here, he strikes an authoritative pose as the undisputed head of the household. The 'abroad' scenario pictures the accoutrements of the male traveller and provides a nostalgic take on an imperial age.*

distant lands with Mulberry-ness. This imperialist discourse is also echoed in the Mulberry 'Gentleman At Home' and 'Gentleman Abroad' Collections (figure 55), collections "redolent of the Edwardian era...aimed at the well-seasoned traveller...offering an array of beautiful yet practical items" (Mulberry brochure, Autumn/Winter, 1989-1990: 2). What is interesting is that these collections, featuring cologne, towels, roll up wet pack, soap and other toiletries, are pitched only at the Mulberry *male* - be it in his British-based home or touring abroad on foreign travel - and the centre/margin, homeland/colony metaphor is very much in play. For example, promotional imagery for the collections is infused with 'imperialist nostalgia', the 'Gentleman Abroad' collection being displayed amidst the manly paraphernalia of exploration and conquest. Binoculars, maps, passports and foreign currency are suggestive of a golden age of empire, whilst other imagery has Mulberry man festooned with guns, swords, stuffed animals and trophies representative of action-packed endeavour. Meanwhile, in stark contrast, promotional imagery from the same season for the women's range (figure 56) has a far more sedate feel, placing Mulberry woman in the cosseted environs of the garden and 'propping' its female accessories (shawl, handbag, cardigan and hat) with the trappings of leisurely pastimes such as watercolour painting and reading.

So we see that an imperial command holds sway over Mulberry's gendering of identities. Mulberry woman is placed subordinate to a male counterpart still very much involved in the transmission of national power, supremacy and plunder. In this vision, men are ticket holders to the Mulberry world, whilst women generally remain in

Figure 56: Mulberry womanswear and accessories. Mulberry woman is found in the garden pursuing such leisurely pastimes as watercolour painting.



familiar, and familial, surroundings. In offering up a limited range of gender roles, Mulberry acts as something of a social regulator, preserving the national *status quo* by moulding and legitimating the rigid criteria of national belonging<sup>27</sup>. However, whilst Mulberry manufactures and manifests an androcentric vision of the national 'norm', one in which masculinity and femininity are fixed around established gender categories, other sectors of fashion and of creative industry have recognised the constraints and inadequacies of this traditional 'gender gap'. The following discussion therefore explores emergent techniques of masculinity and femininity that pose challenges to the hegemony of white heterosexual masculinism and that are organised more around a

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<sup>27</sup> It may be, however, that this interpretation of the heterosexual Mulberry couple - of the dominant male and submissive female - is over simplistic. The lean, muscular sporting body of the Mulberry action man, for example, could also refer to a repressed homoerotic discourse, particularly in view of Mulberry's strong association with leather and leather accessories, a material that has been fetishised with erotic sexual connotations (Steele, 1996).

choice and diversity of identities than around the static gender constructions of neo-imperialist projects such as those we have seen peddled here by Mulberry.

#### **6.4 Transforming the 'Timid Mouseburgers': The new female consumption**

Millum (1975) argues that for many decades creative industry and the popular press represented women as occupying just four roles: the hostess, the mannequin, the self-involved narcissist, or the wife and mother. This lack of choice was particularly marked in portrayals found in women's magazines where the very definition of womanliness was intimately bound up with appearance and dress and where these same magazines were regarded as sites of intensified femininity, the very act of readership being a passive and intrinsically 'female' behavioural trait (Ballaster *et al*, 1991; Chapman, 1988; Craik, 1994; McRobbie, 1997b; Millum, 1975). The style press was therefore regarded as a female domain, as being "soft-centred and soggy" where women were sold an 'old-fashioned' image of "kinder and küche" femaleness (Winship, 1991: 133). In turn, the style press was positioned as antithetical to the idea of mainstream masculinity. As a male journalist argued (from Brooks, 1999, quoted in Goodrum and Crewe, forthcoming), even though men's magazines such as *Arena*, *GQ* and *Esquire* had "been around for a while, [they] were...laughably out of touch...none of us read them...they just seemed obsessed with fashion." Until the 1980s, then, magazines were instructional texts in the art of 'being feminine' and reinforced the essentialist myths that linked gender to specific social trainings. Sawchuk (1988: 64) suggests that these feminised texts and the way in which they sold notions of 'proper' femininity through commodified forms were deeply "repressive and homogeneous" in their effects. As a result, these glossy magazines - and their focus on consumer fashion, beauty techniques and the disciplining of the female body - have been held up as exemplars of female

oppression and seen in opposition to feminism due to their painting of submissive and compliant behaviour in relation to men, the office and romance (Craik, 1994; McRobbie, 1997b).

Such denigration of these publications has, however, been somewhat over simplistic and in many cases has merely gone about generating a fresh set of polarities that still fail to synthesise the complexities and ambiguities of the fashion experience (Carter, 1979; Craik, 1994; McRobbie, 1989; Wilson, 1985). As Wilson (1985: 232) points out,

"the thesis is that fashion is oppressive, the antithesis is that we find it pleasurable.... In all these arguments the alternatives posed are between moralism and hedonism; either doing your own thing is okay, or else it convicts you of false consciousness. Either the products of popular culture are the supports of a monolithic male ideology or they are there to be enjoyed". (Wilson, 1985: 232)

Whilst fashion is condemned with one voice for being part of the vacuous system of consumerism, with another, fashion is praised for offering possibilities of individual expression and of play (see chapters one and two). Neither of these alternative views, however, offer any 'middle ground' through which to explore or to reflect what Wilson (1985: 13) suggests is the "richness" of fashion's "cultural and political meanings" or what Davis (1992:124) describes as the "ambivalences of gender" that have littered fashion history with "profound symbolic tensions". Instead critiques of fashion have been structured around simplistic scenarios in which we are either victims or addicts; oppressed by fashion or liberated by it. Such scenarios have overlooked the tensions of fashion and gender and the uneasiness arising from disavowals of stylistic convention and the blurring - be it implicit or explicit - of fashion's imposed boundaries. For example, the 'androgynous look' (figure 57), a defining style of the mid-eighties,



*Figure 57: The androgynous look by Giorgio Armani, 1984.*

involved a quite conscious melding or muting of gender-specific items of clothing. A spin-off from late seventies punk culture, androgyny triggered a quite purposeful challenge to social norms that demanded gender identity be grounded in some irreducible claim to either male or female. It was a style marked out by,

"a knowingness, a wilful anarchy and an irrepressible optimism, as indicated by colour, exaggeration, humour and disavowal of the conventions of adult dress".

(McRobbie, 1989: 42)

Second-hand dress provided particularly rich pickings for those keen to construct an androgynous look. Women donned men's suits, oversized shirts, trousers and military great coats as a means of imposing a masculine frame onto the feminine form. To add still further to the blurring of gender codes, this appropriated male dress was then

'softened' - or feminised - using devices such as brooches and lipstick so as to completely scramble male and female through strategies of ambivalence, irony and juxtaposition (Davis, 1992; McRobbie, 1989). The subverting of fashion's conventions that we see here<sup>28</sup>, thereby signal the inadequacies of dichotomous gender relations that have, for so long, underpinned fashion theory. The negotiation of 'norms', the refusal of established meanings and strategies of resistance provide challenges to ritual definitions of masculine and feminine. Techniques of androgynous dressing are therefore disruptive acts and examples of what I discussed in chapter five as the practice of autodidacticism - the idea that accepted meanings are increasingly 'taken to task' by discerning and empowered inhabitants of the style scene.

In the following discussion, I explore this empowerment and its attendant negotiation of traditional gender roles still further. In particular, I examine the emergence of new versions of femininity that emphasise the ambiguity and differences of identity before going on to look at the case of Paul Smith and the company's own construction of female fashion. Theirs is an approach that, claims Smith, "is probably quite refreshing for women" (Smith quoted in Spencer, 1994: 88-93). For Paul Smith appeals to the discerning female consumer, one who is in search of alternatives to the "lycra strait-jacketed siren or high fashion junkie" that have dominated and constrained women and

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<sup>28</sup> Again, however, androgynous dress was not entirely novel in its disruption of sartorial gender 'norms'. Throughout the history of fashion, there are examples of challenges to ritual definitions of male and female dress. One icon of sartorial non-conformity was Oscar Wilde (1854-1900). An avid campaigner for dress reform and ardent supporter of the Aesthetic Movement, he went against convention and sported knee breeches (the artistic alternative to trousers), smoking jacket (a new addition to the male wardrobe) and a comfortable, nonconformist soft collar and cravat. Another example is that of the tailor John Stephen. Credited with changing the very notion of British menswear during the 1960s, Stephen was synonymous with the 'swinging' London scene. He revolutionised the way menswear was sold by opening the first male boutique on Carnaby Street and introduced a sense of flamboyance into the "dusty realm" of 'mainstream' male fashion by drawing inspiration, in part, from homosexual style and 'drag' (*The Fashion Book*, 1998: 433; O'Neill, 2000).

women's fashion for so many years (Smith quoted in Crewe and Beaverstock, 1998: 301).

Craik (1994) suggests that certain style publications of the 1980s and 1990s were influential in reflecting and mobilising a shift away from portraits of docile female consumers towards more assertive, fun-seeking and knowledgeable individuals. In particular, Craik (1994) cites *Cosmopolitan* (figure 58) as a pioneering force in the transformation of young women from "timid mouseburgers" to "glossy, confident Cosmo Girls" (McCarthy quoted in Craik, 1994: 52) who were pro-active, independent and keen to 'have a good time'. Portrayals of women in these publications broke away from the conventions of established feminine behaviour by representing girls no longer

Figure 58: *Cosmopolitan* magazine.



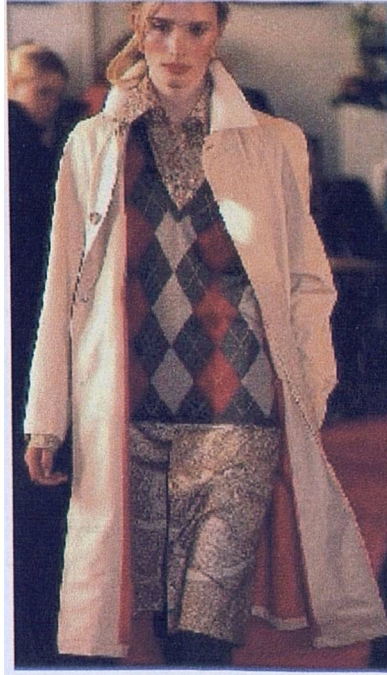


as purely romance-seeking and submissive 'young ladies', but as (crudely) lustful and desiring women - labelled in the 1990s as 'ladettes' - who indulged in drink, drugs and promiscuity. Such 'unlady-like' behaviour signalled the arrival of new definitions of gender and sexual identity. Most significantly of all, however, these magazines invested in female readers a sense of 'knowingness'. With their over-the-top headlines, an almost sleazy in-house editorial style reminiscent of the tabloid press, and coverage of 'sexy' subjects, the emerging publications appealed to, and mobilised, a new form of female consciousness that required readers to possess large amounts of cultural capital, an ability to construct 'ironic distance', and a certain level of socio-cultural sophistication (McRobbie, 1997b). No longer were females considered naïve, clueless and uncritical, but rather these ironic textual referents, and the 'knowing' reading strategies required to make sense of them, mobilised ideas of femininity that drew on parody, resistance and the satirising of mainstream feminine mores.

We briefly visited these linkages between the popular style press and the rise of an altogether more knowledgeable, informed and demanding consumer back in chapter three (section 3.6.iv). In particular, I discussed how the style press identified - and mobilised - a niche in the market that appealed to a consumer desire for paradox, contradiction and for wanting a 'foot in many different camps' (Ballaster *et al*, 1991; Jackson *et al*, 1999). No longer did an emerging autodidactic style community want to be overly packaged and pigeon holed. Instead these knowing, stylistically sophisticated and highly skilled consumers were able to formulate their own sense of individuality by picking and mixing from a range of available identities.

It is this sense of 'being in the know' that is a characterising feature of Paul Smith's

Figure 59: Paul Smith Women, 'low key, effortless, timeless'.



collection for women. First launched in 1994, Paul Smith Women (figure 59) is about the creation of a look that is "low key, effortless, timeless" (Smith in Crewe and Beaverstock, 1998: 301) and thereby set quite apart from the elaborate dress-ways of, say, 'vicarious ostentation' or the ornamental baubles of traditionally showy female dress. The Paul Smith website explains how Paul Smith Women,

"captures the spirit and essence of Paul Smith for men, for women. The main emphasis is on beautifully cut suits and separates in luxurious fabrics merging menswear quality and tradition with feminine style. The attention to fine detail, normally the reserve of menswear tailoring, such as inside pockets, hand stitchings and vivid linings, sets the Paul Smith Women collection apart". (Paul Smith website)

Through the women's collection, Paul Smith appeals to the discerning and stylish autodidact rather than to the conditioned follower of fashion. Indeed Paul Smith Women refuses to endorse the popular preconception that characterises female

followers of fashion solely as dizzy and superficial marketing fodder, keen to indulge in the latest trends and often being 'ripped off' - unlike their male counterparts - with sub-standard products and extortionately high mark-ups (Coleridge, 1989; McDowell, 1994). Smith has translated to his women's range, quality, good design and, perhaps most significantly of all, a desire to be individualistic rather than 'at the cutting edge', blindly chasing after the latest fad. In so doing, Smith has gone some way in disrupting the asymmetrical balance of gender relations that have belittled fashion and its feminised discourses for so long. As Spencer (1994: 88-93) explains,

"It took his [Paul Smith's] female fans...five years to persuade him to turn his attention to women: 'They asked and asked, but I thought about all that stretchy, sexy, cocktail and ballgown stuff and I shuddered. It wasn't my thing at all'. Smith's thing has always been to design men's clothes that rely on cut, colour and cloth.... Once he realised that the formula could translate to women's clothes, 'the shuddering stopped and I just got on with it...it's more about detail than a look hot off the catwalk'". (Spencer, 1994: 88-93)

So we see how Paul Smith Women provides a quite marked departure from those female consumers who are painted as high fashion groupies. Whilst "fashion may love Paul Smith", writes Frankel (1998a: 16-18), Paul Smith "has serious problems with the kissy-kissy baggage that goes with his job, and the hype-driven, show-stopping world of womenswear in particular". Thus, the women's collection is not about offering a single 'look', a certain lifestyle ideology, or a commanding style dictate but instead is about offering high quality clothing for females who think for themselves, are stylistically adept and socio-culturally informed. It is here, in this presentation of women as astute, independent and, above all else, complex individuals that we find Paul Smith has gone some way in disrupting the simplistic gender discourses of fashion.

In the section that follows, I turn my attention to the disruptions that have also begun to take place in meanings of masculinity and how new possibilities have opened up for the redefinition of the relationship between men and fashion. In particular, I am interested in 'new man' and how the rise of this new masculine identity, one that has "legitimated consumption as standard practice for 'right-on' men" (Chapman, 1988: 230) has impacted on traditional gender roles, sexualities and on menswear. I also discuss the pivotal role that the style press played in the arrival of 'new man' and how this new journalistic genre presented the ideal nesting ground for a more complex vision of masculinity, one that welded together the hitherto unthinkable possibilities of man as nurturer and narcissist, consumer, carer and family man.

### **6.5 All Mod Hommes: The birth of 'new man'**

The early 1990s saw an unprecedented amount of media attention on the meanings of masculinity. Confronted by the loss of traditional gender roles and thrown into a sense of unstable disorientation, masculinity was deemed to be in crisis. It suddenly became very fashionable to question one's identity and a central figure to emerge out of the self-doubt and uncertainty that seemed to define the decade was that of 'new man' (figure 60), described by Mort (1996: 15) as,

"a hybrid character, his aetiology could not be attributed to one single source. He was rather the condensation of multiple concerns which were temporarily run together".  
(Mort, 1996:15)

New man, then, was very much the product of the prevailing *zeitgeist*. As television programmes such as BBC2's 'Wimps or Warriors' declared, "it's a myth about masculinity being fixed or natural" (*The Times* quoted in Brooks, 1999), new man, a

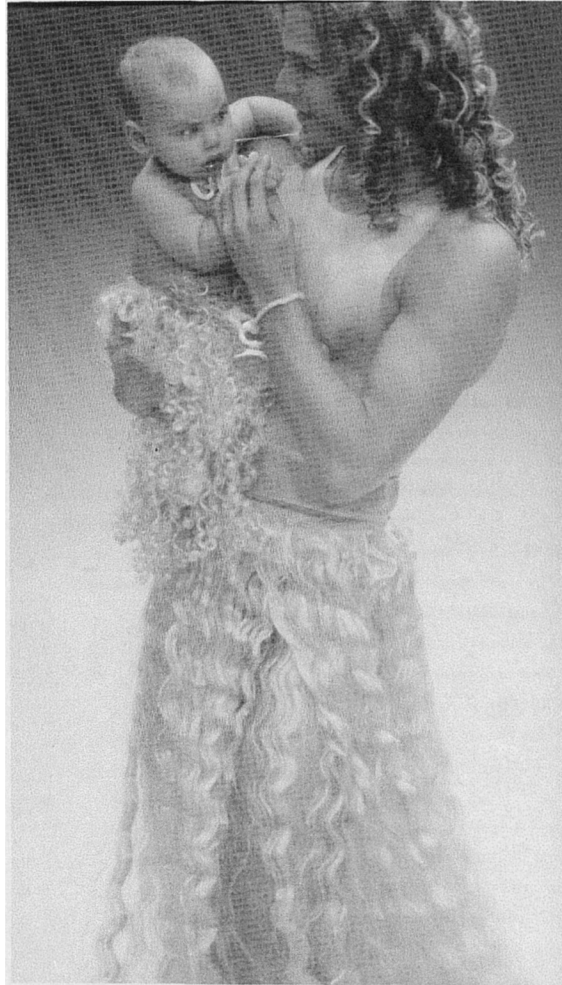


Figure 60: New man. The adventurous designer, Jean-Paul Gaultier has introduced many 'feminine' elements to male dressing. Here, Gaultier places his male model in a 'nurturing' role. The 'revolutionary' label that has been attached to (sartorial renderings of) new man is, however, questionable (see section 6.7). For example, Franklin (1996:93), a fashion commentator, dismissed Gaultier's 'male nurturer' to be nothing more than a "provocative photo opportunity". This view is supported through the case of the England footballer, David Beckham, and the torrent of publicity that surrounded his wearing of a Gaultier sarong in public.

contradictory composite, was the ultimate personification of this move towards multiple masculinities. Having become "more self-conscious of what it is to be a man" and seeing "through the farce of masculinity and all the entrappings that accompany it" (Gentle, 1988: 98), new man set about modifying the very terms on which masculinity had been built.

Mort (1996: 10) argues that "masculinity is multiform, rather than unitary and monolithic. The object of inquiry is masculinities not masculinity". This call for more plural versions of male identity marked a long-awaited departure from essentialist constructions of an older man who comprised a mere handful of neatly defined 'types'. There was, for example, 'the gentleman', "styled and stereotyped as the strong and silent type" (Gentle, 1988: 98); the action man who was "virile, strong, independent and anomic" (Logan, 1992: 88) and denoted by the cowboy, war hero and Marlboro Man; the slob who was functional but uninterested in speed and style, or the chauvinist who was authoritative and ambitious (Craik, 1994). These 'types' were about the delimitation and defence of heterosexual, male hegemony. Those who failed to fit snugly into these discrete categories were at once alienated from the central tenets of what it was to be 'a man'. In part, therefore, new man emerged as a reaction to the exclusionary essence of old man (Chapman, 1988), attempting to open up and to explore new - or previously marginalised - possibilities for the definition of multiple masculinities. As Spencer (1992: 43) argues, new man was a hybrid, "deeply in touch with his anima, and the suppressed female side of his nature, yet retaining the admirable male values of paternity, strength, and virility". So we see here that new man was a tactic of gender insurrection by both men and women who desired change, a reactionary product set to resolve some of the inadequacies of classic machismo. For the first time heterosexual men were forced to look critically at themselves and to question their identities as the norm of power and privilege. This debate over changing sexual and gender roles was concretised in a wide variety of settings. However, it was in the sphere of consumer culture that commercial debate over the identities and consumption patterns of (young) men, as we shall see in the following discussion, loomed particularly large.

The common refrain of the mid-1980s and 1990s was that men had awoken from their "fashionless stupor" (Craik, 1994: 178) and were rediscovering clothing. Once reluctant to sport fashionable clothing for fear of connoting sexual 'dubiousness' or to indulge in effeminate behaviour such as shopping and consumer journalism, the significant changes taking place in the culture of young men set terms for the production of a new, consumerist - and feminised - male personality. Thus, "new groups of style-conscious men" emerged who were "prepared to commit time and money to clothing without the fear of being labelled outlandish...or gay" (Nixon, 1997: 171). Taking an interest in one's appearance was no longer seen as trivial and superficial but was increasingly viewed as a legitimate means of self-signification, a "tangible demonstration of self-worth" (Mort, 1996: 123). New markets were opening up and the creative possibilities of menswear were acknowledged. "There's suddenly more scope and a new market in between classic suits and sporty casual clothes", wrote *The Face* (quoted in Nixon, 1996: 34). Jackson (1995: 108), too, documented that media and advertising displayed "a growing tolerance" towards 'dissident sexualities' and that this supplied a proliferation of tastes and styles for men. The gaining momentum of consumer-oriented society therefore disrupted long-held understandings of masculinity so that implications of male-ness with hardness and emotional distance came to be at odds with the more feminine traits that the "opening up" of consumer space made available (Jackson, 1995: 108). New man, a consumer, was therefore also a rebel and a sexual lawbreaker, in that he rallied against the nationalised male-as-breadwinner ethic and hardline masculinity. As Dodd (1995: 24) commented, "the masculinity which the British...held so strongly...[was]...changing messily, unevenly and with great resistance into a more feminine identity".

As well as a rapidly proliferating style culture, then, the emerging readiness of men to engage with the traditionally female terrain of consumption was also fuelled by developments in feminism and the changing dynamics of family life. The author of the radical men's magazine *Achilles Heel* argued that "the feminist movement left a gap in which anti-sexist men are...struggling for an identity...they want something to call themselves" (quoted in Brooks, 1999). New man therefore came to be a potent symbol for both men and women who were searching for new images and visions of masculinity in the wake of feminism and the men's movement. As Chapman, (1988: 226; Craik, 1994; Davis, 1992) tells us,

"Feminism pathologised masculinity in a way hitherto unprecedented, and lay at its door guilt and responsibility for everything from nuclear war and pollution, to rape, incest and high heels. Its attempt to radically reconstruct femininity meant that the fallout was inevitably registered on the other side of the gender divide". (Chapman, 1988: 226)

As women were increasingly integrated into the workplace and as traditional sexual divisions of labour became muddled - a move that saw women dressing 'less for sex' and 'more for success' (Davis, 1992) - the gender certainties of an old patriarchal order became reworked. If women's roles and dress ways were changing (as I discussed earlier in the chapter, section 6.4), then so were men's and it was on the male style scene where this change was especially apparent. Indeed, the fashion sector welcomed the 'crisis of masculinity' and the hand-wringing uncertainty that accompanied it as an entirely positive move. As Mort (1996: 16) argues, "for a sector in which diversity was its lifeblood, new personas were always to be welcomed" and cultural industry at large was aware of the commercial potential offered up by changing gender roles (Jackson, 1995; Jackson and Holbrook, 1995). For example, according to O'Dwyer, an industry commentator and trade journalist, the eighties saw men's fashion at last "coming out of



the closets" (quoted in Mort, 1996: 16), this deliberate language of homosexual liberation implying that the appearance of new man had much to do with the breaking down of sexual stereotypes and the gathering momentum - and recognition - of gay politics on the high street and in popular culture.

The commercial gains to emerge from this burgeoning male interest in style, appearance and identity meant that the 1980s and 1990s witnessed a sustained effort by cultural industry to capture the male market. At stake was the "hyper-cultivation of the male body" (Mort, 1988: 204) around new codes of masculinity, physicality and dressability. Central to the cultivation of this new male style market was the associated rise of the male 'style magazine', a vehicle that proved invaluable to the dissemination and legitimisation of these new masculine codes. What is especially interesting is the importance that this new genre of publication<sup>29</sup> had for acceptable representations of *British* men and the reconciliation of male consumption within the national consciousness. For up until this point, the young male market in Britain had been exceptionally difficult to crack, weighed down by the androcentric legacy of male producer/female consumer, nervous of showing a wimpish interest in fashion and clinging to the last vestiges of their conventional wardrobes, the masculine refusal of fashion was couched in a nationalised rhetoric that viewed stylish dressing to be an un-

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<sup>29</sup> The male magazine, was not, strictly speaking, an entirely new media product of the eighties. The most important precursor to the publications of the 1980s was *Town*, a 'gentlemen's tailoring magazine' founded in 1953 (Mort, 1996; Nixon, 1993). The format drew on photo-journalism, politics, fashions, theatre, films, music, and books. *Town* magazine, was however, quite unusual in its pitch as a men's 'general-interest' magazine. It is generally recognised that prior to 1983 (Nixon, 1996) men's general-interest magazines were deemed non-viable: "while women become 'friends' with their magazines there is an inbuilt male resistance to the idea of a magazine that makes public and shares ideas about being a man. To men it is an unacceptable contradiction. Self-consciousness is permissible, even attractive in a women [*sic*]; it is perceived as weak and unmanly in a man" (Marquis in Nixon, 1996: 129). Up until 1983, then, magazines for men were generally either 'specialist' (automotive; sports, and photographic mags) or 'pornographic' (for example, the 'soft porn' magazine *Playboy*, [Conekin, 2000]).

British pastime - literally a 'foreign' concept. As Reed (1990: 18) argues in relation to Mulberry and several other classic British clothing retailers,

"Traditionally, mainstream British menswear is influenced by inflexible dress codes for every occasion. What a gentleman wears to the office, to dinner, on the sportsfield or on holiday has been dictated to the last detail over the generations. Retailers such as Hackett and Mulberry, and designers such as Margaret Howell experiment with this tradition and successfully sell this classic look.... In general, British men tend to have a natural suspicion of fashion and designer labels". (Reed, 1990: 18)

The respectability of the Great British Male was in fear of being sullied by an invasion from continental Europe. As Spencer (1992: 40) argues "the creeping arrival of Euroman, with his suspect peacockery and his handbags threaten[ed] the dull purity" of British men who were notoriously poorly dressed and stylistically introverted. In order to succeed, therefore, the new male magazines and style publications had to destabilise hegemonic ideas of what constituted British masculinity. Thus their credo was largely one of bricolage and of social and cultural counter-gossip, of turning the established order upside-down so as to reflect a (post-)modern nation that was plural, multi-ethnic and composed of diverse and jumbled identities (Mort, 1996). "The effect was" writes Mort (1996: 64-70) "...to promote the idea of cultural diversity as part of the diaspora of style".

The likes of *i-D*, *The Face*, *Arena* and *GQ* went to great pains to speak to the serious-minded and style conscious male consumer and in so doing consciously distanced themselves from the notion of the downmarket fashion magazine with their unsophisticated readerships. Rather, the up-and-coming new publications emphasised ideas of 'style', of 'difference', of 'plurality' and of having a select minority appeal. As Mort (1996: 24) argues,

"These titles...held the key to a new type of male consumer. It was the innovative scrambling of readership identities and journalistic genres which made...[them]...so pivotal in the debate over...young men and their gendered rituals of consumption".  
(Mort,1996:24)

In contrast to the stable set of icons that had been served up in earlier journalistic renderings, the innovative male magazines of the late twentieth century avoided the dull and predictable blond, clean-cut good looks of the heroic male and ideal citizen. Rather, via techniques of juxtaposition, these magazines engendered a sense of plurality and explored marginal identities and the idea of difference. Mixed race, Latino and Afro-Caribbean males were regularly featured in fashion sequences whilst the complexities of male social and sexual relationships also appeared as presiding themes.

New man, as we have seen constructed here by the style press, therefore offered a whole range of previously unthinkable - in mainstream renderings, at least - possibilities for the British male. New man was envisaged as a softer, more reflexive and altogether more stylish individual. However, and as I go on to show, the emergence of this new masculinity in 1990s Britain, was - and for some still is - an unsettling process. Whilst new man, on the one hand, marked a welcome and revolutionary definition of more plural masculinities, on the other, this same plurality inherent to new man gave rise to a certain level of anxiety and anxiousness. Rutherford (1988: 230) articulates this unease and argues that although "the original new man welded together the possibilities of the nurturer and the narcissist" the construct was in fact a "flawed whole...[and] in reality the new man was always an uneasy mixture".

Some of these tensions and ambivalences might be explored through an examination of the key sartorial motifs found in Paul Smith's range of clothing for men. For Paul

Smith, in his renderings of masculinity, does indeed offer up a plurality of significations for those men who are keen to leave behind the strict - and restrictive - codes that have characterised British male dress. As C. McDowell (1995) tells us, Paul Smith has had a profound influence on male fashion and has broadened the boundaries on what constitutes 'acceptable' masculine dress,

"Wearing a Paul Smith shirt can be a little like wearing a seaside postcard.... He [Paul Smith] has wittily liberated our views on colours; he has made us conscious of traditional materials; he has taken the fear out of male fashion".

(McDowell, C., 1995:28)

These 'liberating' significations are not necessarily, however, the transformative force they may at first appear, nor, as I go on to show, do they pose entirely explosive challenges to the enshrined power bases of contemporary Britain.

### **6.6 All Things To All (New) Men?: Paul Smith's multiple masculinities**

Paul Smith has undoubtedly been a key player in the transformation of male consumption. As I first outlined in chapter three (section 3.6), Paul Smith is most known for his 'revolutionary' work on the male wardrobe and has brought to the British fashion business a keen awareness of global variation in consumption patterns. He laments the British male's renunciation of fashion, arguing that, in contrast, "if you live near Prato you have beauty all around you. Great food. Great dressing. It's absolutely okay" (Smith quoted in Crewe and Goodrum, forthcoming). To his credit, Smith has managed to introduce this European sense of style, quality and design into the British male consumption scene and has successfully instilled his products with a strong sense of identity, suggestive of understated style. As the men's magazine *i-D* (1997: 151) argues,

"His [Smith's] own influence has made English men - if not males the world over - feel slightly less worried while thinking about fashion. 'Before the early '80s, if you worked in an office and wore a bright tie, people would think you were somehow 'odd'. My main contribution has been getting the British man to care about how he looks".

(*i-D*, 1997: 151)

In many ways, then, Paul Smith emerged as a cultural authority in determining the codes of a new form of masculinity. He did this by offering a repertoire of styles, three of which I discuss here in more detail.

Figure 61: R. Newbold 'Network' collection, spring/summer 1998.



Grey paper touch coat with concealed buttons worn with white zip-up shirt and khaki bellows pocket combat pants

Firstly, there is Paul Smith's evident middle class romanticising of a long-passed working class masculinity, one that is seen as more authentic, more gritty and more honest than its white-collar counterpart. Of particular pertinence is Smith's 'R. Newbold' range and its discourse on utility design and its influence on British fashion. The Newbold collection was inspired by a factory of the same name that Paul Smith

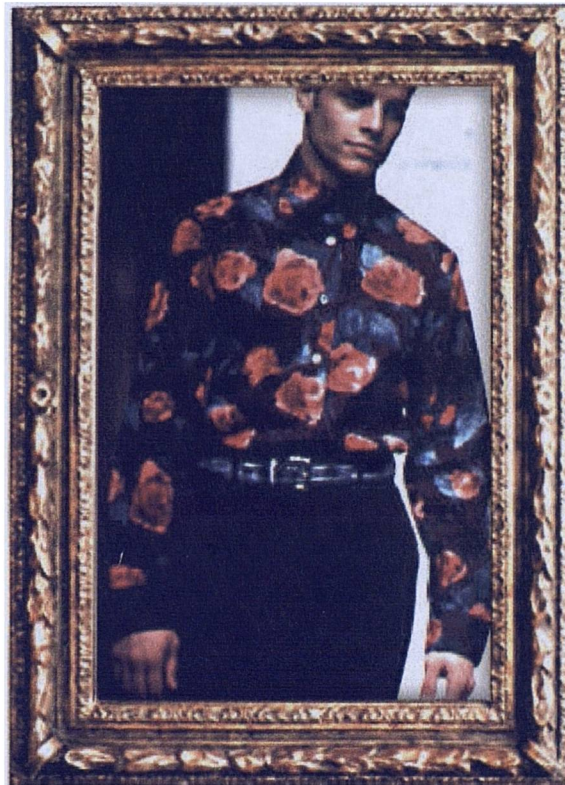
bought in 1991 and that originally supplied the army and the great British stores, Harrods and Browns. The very first R. Newbold collections included several styles and garments that the factory was famous for having produced in the past. For example, the Spring/Summer 1998 'Network' collection (figure 61) echoed the utility wear of garments worn by early servicemen and technicians during the construction of the telecommunications industry. What is important here is the way Paul Smith has foregrounded workwear and utility as dominant motifs within the collection. The value accorded here to workwear is indicative of a celebration of working class masculinity and suggests a reverence for a time when real men grafted and life was uncomplicated.

What is unusual is that it is the workwear (a domain normatively regarded as antithetical to fashion and stylish dress - see chapter two) and not the leisurewear of earlier eras that is being celebrated. The collection, therefore, recognises the world of male, manual work, the very world that, if not entirely lost, is rapidly disappearing. Thus, it is here that we mourn the loss of 'old man', of the male breadwinner and of an uncomplicated male-as-producer identity that ties masculinity inextricably to the world of work. Consequently this version of Paul Smith man is suggestive of the uncertainties and provisionalities of masculine identities at the turn of the twenty-first century. New man looks back to old man for a sense of security and stability in a fast-moving and slippery style world. Howarth (quoted in Jones 1995c: 68) articulates this sentiment, writing that Paul Smith offers a solution to this crisis of male identity, so that,

"the thing about Paul is that he understands the psychology of men. He understands that the fundamental thing about men and clothes is that a lot of us are interested in clothes but we know it's not particularly manly to be fanatical about them. His clothes make you look interesting without looking stupid". (Howarth in Jones, 1995c: 68)

Secondly, there is, as I outlined in chapter five (section 5.5), a sense of Paul Smith man as a knowing and witty ironist - a style autodidact (figure 62). The full range of Paul Smith products, from the infamous boxer shorts, to the cheeky cuff-links and kitsch office accoutrements, are suggestive of this other version of new man, that is, 'new lad' with his ironic knowingness and laddish posturing. A reaction to the media scorn that was increasingly piled upon the "supposed 'new man' with his phoney nappy changing...ways" (*The Observer*, 1994, quoted in Crewe and Goodrum, forthcoming), new lad was born. Fuelled by popular male publications, such as *Loaded*, men could

*Figure 62: Paul Smith man as a style autodidact. This photo-printed shirt with its loud and garish design is set to appeal to a hedonistic consumer, one who disrupts the conventions of good taste and traditional codes of appropriate male dress.*



once again be themselves and could revert to laddish behaviour and boys' toys. Paul Smith, with his ironic stance towards the canons of good taste, very much captures this sense of fun and frivolity within men's consumption and plays to an audience who appreciate the sartorial satire embedded within the 'Smithy' corporate philosophy and the off-beat and anarchic stage that is the Paul Smith store.

*Figure 63: Paul Smith's élitist, narcissistic new man. This outfit is part of Smith's 'London Collection' of autumn/winter 1997. The suit is finely tailored and exudes an air of style and chic. The 'Hampstead' jacket, 'W1' trousers and 'Threadneedle' shirt - all referring to élite locations in central London - infer a sense of prestige on the wearer.*





Finally, there is a version of new man that is élitist and classist (figure 63). This version of masculinity is built on a very particular tradition of Anglo-British craftsmanship and quality, reaching its apotheosis in the spectacular space of Westbourne House (see chapter five, section 5.5). With an emphasis on understatement and on inconspicuous consumption, such sartorial élites employ intelligent and knowing prose in their consumptional vocabularies and draw on discourses of quality, design and exclusivity to legitimise their excessive expenditure. This version of new man is resolutely middle class and employs the classically Bourdieuan tactics of the controlled cultivation of taste in order to carve out a sense of distinction. Impeccably presented and smartly 'turned-out', he indulges in Paul Smith's branded aftershave and participates in the rituals of male grooming and 'image management'. Dismissed as chauvenistic, élitist and vain (Chapman, 1988; Mort, 1996; Rutherford, 1988), this version of new man buys into the stereotypical iconography of the 1980s yuppie and 1990s cultural intermediary: a creative and discerning professional who knows quality when he sees it and is prepared to pay for it.

So we are left with Paul Smith's three versions of masculinity: the nostalgic 'new old man'; the hedonistic, ironic new lad, and the élitist, narcissistic new man. This production of hybrid masculinities, of the presentation of conflicting and contradictory notions of male identity - as realised in the quirky and humorous printed shirts set side-by-side against immaculately styled couture suits - certainly goes some way in disrupting the stubborn and the rather crude gender dichotomies of the fashion establishment. Smith indeed offers up an innovative portrait of modern British masculinity in all its diversity. However, these motifs of masculinity are also, by the same token, extremely problematic and a question mark hovers over their 'revolutionary'

status. For as I go on to discuss here, in many ways these incarnations of new man are something of a false prophecy, "producing a hybrid masculinity which is better able and more suited to retain control" (Rutherford, 1988: 235).

### 6.7 The Great Pretender?: Co-opting new man into the service of patriarchy

Whilst new man appears between the covers of an ever-expanding number of magazines-for-men and in the commercial representations of several fashion organisations, he has more recently been derided as a false ideal and a media-created fad. For example, Spencer (1992: 43) argues that,

"new man was always...a kind of projected animus that roamed the rails of menswear looking for fun, eventually becoming a well-dressed *yeti*, a mythical creature thought to exist, much speculated upon, occasionally sighted, but damnably evasive. A few years ago I conducted a straw poll of female acquaintances on the subject of new man. 'I know they wear Paul Smith', said one magazine editor, 'but I've never met one.'"

(Spencer, 1992: 43)

The evasiveness of new man that we see here suggests the rise of a 'new' male who was gentle yet strong, sensitive yet sexy, stylish yet knowingly ironic, was essentially a marketing ploy, plugging into and exploiting the prevailing anxieties over gender and sexual identity (Dodd, 1995). Jackson (1995), for example, suggests that the commodification of this anxiety was the latest in a long series of moves that saw dissident cultures and identities readily appropriated for commercial gain. He argues that,

"the new generation of men's magazines like *GQ* [Gentleman's Quarterly] and *Attitude* promote a version of 'body politics' that Anita Roddick would find only too easy to sell. Their interest in gender and sexuality is little more than shopping for style: aiming for an affluent, youthful market where transgressive sexualities and blurred gender

identities are the latest fashion, a form of 'cultural clothing' that can be abandoned at the first real sign of gender trouble". (Jackson, 1995: 108)

New man is therefore indicative of style over substance, of the ability to sport the trappings and symbols of difference and diversity as a fashion trend in which techniques of individualism and transgression are the latest vogue. "Never more than a gleam in an ad man's eye, just one more nasty con-trick by the mendacious magician of consumer capitalism" (Chapman, 1988: 228), new man, it would seem, was first and foremost a marketing ploy.

As a commercially derived and oriented construct, then, new man chimed quite deliberately into a socio-cultural trend that saw the 'feminisation' of men. However, rather than being a positive move symbolic of a burgeoning equality between genders, such incursions by new man into the traditionally feminine spheres of domesticity and consumerism were seen by some as a sign that, "having secured the heartland of the public, men...[were] now moving into the private" (White quoted in Brooks, 1999). In this interpretation, new man is not so much a rebel and a lawbreaker attempting to cast off the shackles of an older set of masculinist tropes but rather new man is a reactionary figure, one who has been "co-opted into the service of patriarchy" (Chapman, 1988: 235). Whilst popular representations of men have altered quite dramatically into more plural and feminised formulations, these incarnations have constituted part of a patriarchal survival strategy, one in which men change, but only in order to hold on to power rather than to relinquish it. Thus, as Chapman (1988: 247) explains, new man is a,

"patriarchal mutation, a redefinition of masculinity in men's favour, a reinforcement of the gender order, representing an expansion of the concept of legitimate masculinity, and thus an extension of its power over women and deviant men. New masculinity, like the old, relies upon a fissure in gender, and an unequal positioning of values".

(Chapman, 1988: 247)

For all the rhetoric surrounding Paul Smith as, an epoch-making force in the realm of male fashion; for exploding the entrenched mores of gender and sexuality that have ruled fashion for so long, and for persuading British men that "well-cut cloth was not just for Italian pretty boys" (Macalister, 1995: 43), the fundamental problem remains: the so-called 'new' man (as mobilised and endorsed by Smith) is not simply about the full-scale abandonment of dichotomous power relations of masculinity/femininity. Rather, new man, it is argued, is a "wolf in sheep's clothing" (Mort, 1988: 197). So that, as Chapman (1988: 248) concludes,

"If what we define as female qualities will be highly valued in our brave new future, then to maintain hegemony it is in men's interests to co-opt femininity. In this case, the future may be female, but I fear it will still belong to men." (Chapman, 1988: 248)

What, then, do these questions and conflicts over the provenance and tenor of 'new man' tell us more generally about the gendering of British fashion? "Do they", asks Jackson, (1995: 108), "signal a welcome break in the defences of compulsory heterosexuality from which we can all benefit, whatever our [gender and] sexual orientation? Or do they represent a cynical commodification of our current 'gender troubles', making a fast buck from the ambiguities of our contemporary gender and sexual identities?" It is in this very tension - and its inherent irreconcilability - that I think we find a telling commentary on the current character of British creative industry. For once again, we see that British fashion (including the British fashion press) is inhabited by - and

generative of - yet more 'narratives of ambiguity', in this particular instance in terms of the contradictions surrounding gender and sexual identities.

Over the course of this chapter I have problematised the neat dichotomies that we have seen as being still so pervasive in the commercial world: "women" writes Franklin (1996: 163), "have...fastenings that close on the right, along with colourful and flimsy designs using tactile or 'feel me' fabrics". She continues,

"These are introduced to little girls the moment they are born. Pink lacy rompersuits are followed by pastel dresses with cuddly 'stroke me' animal motifs. Light colours unable to disguise dirt force parents into prohibiting muddy or grimy activities. Little boys of course can get as dirty as they like in darker colours with action motifs like 'get out of my way' cars and sportsmen".  
(Franklin, 1996: 163)

Yet when placed against the likes of what I have discussed in this chapter as the loutish ladette, the caring sharing male nurturer, the heroic macho, or, for example, the hedonistic new lad, this vision of 'pastel femaleness' versus 'grimy maleness' emerges as only part of what is a far more complex host of gendered encounters. More widely then, my discussion here feeds in to the broader debate that I have examined over the course of my previous chapters concerning the 'distilling down' of Britishness by certain cultural intermediaries. For as we have seen in relation to gender here, essentialist renderings and explanations of identity ignore the 'narratives of ambiguity' and the schizophrenic nature that are also very much a part of British fashion.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### Afterword: The Empire's new clothes?

#### 7.1 The Blueblood Beauties: Alexander McQueen and a vision for the future

In February 2001, the fashion designer, Alexander McQueen scooped the title 'Designer of the Year' at the British Fashion Awards. This latest accolade brings my exploration of British fashion bang up-to-date. In turn, and most importantly, the case of McQueen also draws together several of the key themes that I have discussed over the course of the preceding chapters with regard to British fashion, Britishness and the linkages between the two. For Alexander McQueen, and his newly acquired status as *the* figurehead of the national industry, supplies a rich commentary on the many paradoxes that we have seen as lying at the heart of British fashion. In particular, McQueen's "unquenchable thirst to redraw fashion's limits" (Soares, 2001: no pagination) and his mixing (that we first saw in section 2.7) of seemingly disparate socio-cultural references chimes in with my key assertion that singular and straightforward identifications of British fashion are oversimplifications, in need of being re-worked in more multiple and complex ways.

McQueen's 'Blueblood Beauties' (figure 64) provides such a re-working and is a seminal image. It offers up an avenue for British fashion of the future, one that spans and exploits many ambiguities, and one that enables a sense of Britishness that explores the marginalities of identity through the disruptive strategies of irony and inversion. The Blueblood Beauties image was featured in a special 'London Swings Again!' report for the popular lifestyle publication, *Vanity Fair* in March 1997. The Beauties photograph was one of several defining images in the report that documented the ascendancy of,

and key players in, the emerging 'swinging' London scene. At this time, Cool Britannia was a burgeoning phenomenon, constructed against the political rhetoric and wranglings



*Figure 64: The Blueblood Beauties. Aristocratic models (from left to right) Iris Palmer, Honor Fraser, Jodie Kidd and Jasmine Guinness strike a British pose at Blenheim Palace, Oxfordshire wearing fashion by Alexander McQueen (Honor's T-shirt is from Top Shop, boots are by Jimmy Choo, Jones the Bootmaker and Office). This image was featured in the British lifestyle publication, 'Vanity Fair', March 1997, as part of a special report on 'Swinging London' and posits a challenge to the terms in which Britain and Britishness is represented on the global style map.*

of the impending May 1997 general election. The image and accompanying press report was therefore in circulation during the campaign season, a time when both the Labour and Conservative Parties were keen to exploit what came to be known as 'the feel good factor'. The mobilisation of this factor relied extensively on the gathering

momentum and rising stars of the British creative industries, with the "giddy energy and youthful style" (*Vanity Fair*, 1997: 6) of the national fashion scene proving to be a particularly useful tool in the political battle over Britain. As Kamp (1997: 102) argued, popular culture was the focus of unprecedented spin:

"Tony Blair's Labour Party has clung chiggerlike to the sympathetic statements of Noel Gallagher of Oasis and his putative rival, Damon Albarn of Blur.... Even more extraordinarily, John Major - gray-flannelled, beans-on-toast John Major! - concluded his speech at the Lord Mayor's banquet...by ticking off the ways in which British culture rules the world, quoting *Newsweek's* recent assertion that London is 'the coolest city on the planet' and further mentioning that 'our country has taken over the fashion catwalks of Paris'". (Kamp, 1997: 102)

On this latter point, John Major (the then Prime Minister), makes reference to Alexander McQueen's ascension to head designer at the French couture house, Givenchy (a position that became available when John Galliano, another young British designer, moved to the rival Parisian house of Dior). It is through McQueen's much publicised defection to continental Europe and his hooking of the coveted spot at Givenchy that we see how British fashion was - and still is - caught in a complex (political) project, at once galvanising a sense of national prosperity and global competitiveness but also dogged by indifference, mediocrity and a long list of what I termed in chapter one (section 1.4) as the 'economic' and 'symbolic' factors of deterioration. Indeed this point formed the main thrust of my argument in chapter one: the idea that British fashion is seen as creatively exciting, yet simultaneously suffers from a long history of government neglect; cultural and industrial marginalisation; escalating costs, and mounting pressures of redundancy and recession.



What is interesting here however is the central role that McQueen had to play in both mobilising and perpetuating this paradox. McQueen, a young St. Martin's fashion graduate from London's working-class East-End, personified a new cool. "London exploded with talent in the mid-90s and the élan was due mostly to McQueen's inspiration". He is regarded as being one of the primary forces in "rejuvenating the London fashion scene" and was the male muse behind much pre-election discourse on the vibrancy of the Great British nation (*www.fashionlive.com*, 2001). Yet for all the political spin surrounding McQueen and the hype that marked him out as one of the cultural trailblazers in a rejuvenating and newly cool London, McQueen was dismissive of the national project in which he had played such a visionary part: "I'm not one of his [John Major's] own! He didn't get me there.... Typical of the government! They do nothing to help you when you're trying to do something, then take credit when you're a success!" (McQueen, quoted in Kamp, 1997: 102). Whilst being heralded in his home nation of Britain as a major protagonist in the country's creative renaissance, we see here that McQueen was, at the same time, the country's own worst critic and defector. Indeed his move to the high-calibre and generously resourced Parisian scene, "his proletariat irreverence" (*www.fashionlive.com*, 2001) and his screwball stunts whilst in residence at Givenchy have done little to aid or alter perceptions of British fashion overseas. Instead the likes of McQueen's infamous 'bumster' trousers (set to transform buttocks into the world's new cleavage); his costume extravaganzas "of such grandeur...[they]...made Ben Hur look wimpy (*www.fashionlive.com*, 2001), and his 'enfant terrible' image that led the French press to dub him as "the hooligan of English fashion" (*www.elle.com*, 2001), merely exacerbated an older prejudice that regards the British industry as uncommercial, hype-driven and as failing to back its home-grown talent.

McQueen's predecessor, last year's winner of the British Designer of the Year title (2000), Hussein Chalayan is a stark reminder of how British fashion is still an ailing industry whose successful development is by no means guaranteed and whose challenges to truly rival the other European fashion hubs of France and Italy are yet to be realised. Chalayan went into liquidation at the end of 2000 with debts of £250,000, whilst McQueen, five years after first slamming the British Conservative government for failing to fund fashion adequately, continues to criticise the neglect of, and poor attitude towards, fashion under the Labour Party leadership. When collecting his Designer of the Year title at the February 2001 awards he (in Soares, 2001: no pagination) argued how,

"It's sad really that you generate all this press... but [the government] don't really put their money where their mouth is. They expect you to do it all yourself, whereas in France the government really funds the fashion industry".

(McQueen, in Soares, 2001: no pagination)

This landscape of industrial instability, government neglect and poor cultural perceptions of fashion has resulted in designers, such as Chalayan, and brands, such as Mulberry, displaying the symptoms of a national industry that is languishing in the legacy of a Fordist tradition and a national economy that has failed to take design creativity seriously. Over the course of this thesis I have discussed the changing fortunes of Mulberry and how the company, once the hallmark of eighties aspirational chic, is currently witnessing a slump in both profits and popularity. Mulberry's decline is due to the convergence of a variety of factors: the combined 'external' pressures of inadequate national and industrial resources as well as the company's own 'internal' problems that centre on an institutional refusal to adapt to the unprecedented transformations taking place in a diversifying marketplace.

My discussion in chapter two both charted and explored these transformations in production, retailing and consumption. In particular it looked at how the concept of globalisation, when applied to fashion, has been theorised and thought of in terms of straightforward economic exchanges and notions of standardisation and homogeneity. The stranglehold of large corporations and the uniformity generated by the single retail site, the chain store and the 'sameness' of the British high street have overshadowed more nuanced and culturally-led perspectives on British fashion. These perspectives embrace 'the local' and are sensitised to pursuing the complexities of fashion, consumers and the consumptive experience. For no longer is it adequate to treat consumers as simple-minded, easily seduced and uninformed. As the marketing magazine *Campaign* argues,

"people nowadays feel they need to be treated as an individual.... The old, large categories were like herds of people. Now you are talking about lots of smaller little wolf packs all searching for their own style". (*Campaign* in Nixon, 1996: 91)

Individualism and a diversity of styles, then, are part of a transforming marketplace in which flexibility and specialisation are the key to engaging with what is a far more demanding collection of consumers. There is a growing intolerance towards the essentialising regimes of those 'lifestyle' brands that are formulaic, overly-manufactured and tightly defined. Mulberry, for example, had been incredibly successful at selling a clearly prescribed lifestyle couched in an aspirational aesthetic of tweeds, country living, tennis clubs and an anti-modern ethic. Yet the fixed set of stable icons and iconography that it laid out for consumption fell foul to a change in consumer mood that rejected the inadequacies of this one-to-one correspondence between particular commodities and particular identities. The mid-1990s saw an emerging reaction against

overbearingly instructive brands (such as Mulberry), mass-produced offerings and the perceived inauthenticity of the high street. The emerging range of consumers instead sought a more unique, individualised and personalised consumption experience that was both a counter to the sterility of the British middle-market as well as a mechanism for the formation of more meaningful symbolic identities.

The Blueblood Beauties picture informs this desire for more meaningful identities through its smudging of different socio-cultural trends and traditions and through its visualisation of what a more hybrid sense of Britishness might look like. McQueen, who apprenticed with top Savile Row tailors Anderson and Shepherd, and who later worked for Gieves and Hawkes, has his roots set firmly in the formalised conventions of a time-honoured master craft. However, McQueen is also "a total innovator who likes to push things to extremes" and combines his exquisite tailoring skills with a provocative, rebellious streak. One of his early catwalk shows, for example, used the blood of crushed beetles and human hair, whilst the fashion world was scandalised by McQueen's shows of the mid-90s that saw models bound in scotch-tape, blood stained and scorched with tyre tracks (*www.elle.com*, 2001).

The Blueblood Beauties illustrates how the couture tradition - mobilised by McQueen's visionary and boundary-breaking role within it as both couturier *and* street stylist - is increasingly influenced by, and mixed with, a range of subcultural codings in the articulation of diversity through pastiche and bricolage. For example, the Beauties picture shows Honor Fraser sporting a gelled mohawk and safety-pin accessories in what are clear references to the punk culture of eighties Britain. Juxtaposed with this is Fraser's T-shirt, a quite different stylistic reference taken from the British teenage

fashion chain, Top Shop, a store that is 'cheap and cheerful' and the very antithesis of the painstakingly crafted, labour intensive and high quality one-offs of couture-house designers. Different again are the signifiers of certain minority groupings signalled here in the Blueblood Beauties picture through studs, chains, PVC, dog collars, spike heels and fishnets. These point towards the fetish wear of the sexually subversive and are part of an unsanctioned fraction of British culture. Alongside this, Jodie Kidd's appearance flags up yet another alternative taste reference, that of an anti-glamour sentiment, with her over-processed, frizzy hair, panda-eyes and bleach-stained vest suggestive of a community positioned outside of the boundaries of mainstream style codes. It is in this convergence of a wide range of fashionable identities, as seen here through the case of the Blueblood Beauties, that the consumer vogue for diversity, and for a mixing of identities is mobilised. The ambivalences articulated in this particular image bear out the idea that fashion does not neatly follow, nor conform to, the 'trickle down' theory in which fashion is posited as a class privilege spreading downwards through the social hierarchy of developed western society. Rather, as the Blueblood Beauties show, couture draws upon and is informed by a wide variety of stylistic and social codings, in this particular instance ranging from Westwood-inspired punk and bondage gear through to a nationalised iconography of British military tradition and ceremonial pomp and circumstance. More widely, this mixing of different stylistic systems goes about disrupting what are the 'false' dichotomies of fashion in which haute couture and street styles, fashion and anti-fashion have been drawn as diametric opposites. Such dichotomous characterisations have failed to capture the tensions and confusions of fashion and its related mechanisms of (national) identity formation.

In chapter three I illustrated some of these tensions surrounding British national identity and showed how fashion, as a site of banal nationness, has been a crucial - yet underexplored - mechanism in their daily iteration. The connection between nationness, as a sense of identity, and fashion, as a site through which that identity might be crystallised, has yet to have been fully articulated. Yet, as we have seen through the cases of Mulberry and Paul Smith, and as is obvious in the nationalistic discourses firmly embedded in the *Blueblood Beauties* picture, a great many fashion intermediaries both draw upon, and are bound up in defining, a sense of Britishness as part of their corporate or commercial projects. Whilst the geo-political future of the United Kingdom hangs precariously and is facing unprecedented threats in the face of devolution, of increasing European integration, and of global challenges to the very validity of the nation as a unit of classification, the commercial arena of fashion continues to view British nationness as a valuable, and value-adding, tool. What my discussion of Mulberry and Paul Smith in chapter three illustrated, then, was how, despite these geo-political challenges, each company continued to identify with, and to go about constructing, a sense of Britishness as a means to brand distinction. The senses of Britishness identified by each company were, however, quite different in their shape and form. We saw, for example, how Mulberry endorses an idea of the British nation that draws inspiration from a romanticised and idealised Edwardian lifestyle, a time of British imperial expansion, harking back to a way of life now passed. Paul Smith similarly draws on this consumer yearning for tradition and for a sense of stability in what is now a 'speeded up', fragmentary world. Yet unlike Mulberry (whose hidebound corporate imagery, coupled with a refusal to update their dowdy nostalgia, played a large part in the company's decline), Paul Smith has managed to strike a balance between traditional offerings of Britishness and a creative independence in

which more contemporary and innovative renderings of nationness might also be nurtured. Together, Smith's mixing of classic and contemporary stylistic vocabularies, of high and low cultures, has promoted diversity and has, still further, resulted in a unique sartorial 'take' on British identity that goes about portraying the true depth of British styling in all its complexity.

More generally, the different portraits of Britain and British fashion that Mulberry and Paul Smith have conjured up through their corporate identities tell us that any definitive claim to the nation is problematical. The differences between Mulberry and Paul Smith's versions of Britishness reinforce the idea that national identity is a cultural construct whose meaning is mutable and shifts with social forces. Britishness, then, can mean many different things to different people and this very hybridity is exploited by the players of the fashion industry who go about inventing national images according to their own agenda. This point is pertinent in relation to the 'fuzziness' that we have seen surrounding national terminology, with 'Britain' often referring interchangeably to the United Kingdom *and* to England alike, a symptom of England's (self-imposed) predominance within the multi-national state. In turn, this ambiguity suggests that Britishness is not purely and simply lodged in material markers to do with political territory, border controls and residing in a given area. Rather, Britishness is a banal phenomenon of the geographical imagination, with the cultural intermediaries of fashion and other such creative industries wielding considerable power over what is its, largely symbolic, activation.

In going about what is the global business of fashion, then, we see that Mulberry and Paul Smith maximise their national affiliation and thereby play to a consumer desire for

distinction, difference and the globalisation of diversity. My discussion in chapter four explored how this commercial identification with a British locale is particularly important to export success, and how the indulgence of imagined perceptions of Britishness and of British style are crucial in targeting overseas markets. Here I focussed on British fashion exports to Japan and identified how these exports had to fulfil strict criteria in order to endorse an imagined Japanese perception of British lifestyle and character. The Japanese identify the British way of life with notions steeped in an imperial tradition. This translates sartorially into a Japanese demand for classic, aspirational British labels that satisfy a Britishness couched in references to an imagined eccentric disposition, to colonial dress and militaria, field sports and to exacting standards of quality, attention to detail and fine finishing. In order to tap into this Japanese desire for the consumption and display of 'real' British commodities, then, the most successful exports to Japan are those nostalgia-evoking labels with a high ethnic value and market position. To this end, British exporters are encouraged to play up their intrinsic *Britishness* through the weaving of time-honoured traditions, family roots, heritage and distinctive stories onto their products. However, whilst this strategy has both exploited, and profited from, a certain Japanese mind-set, this particular process of product enchantment has also led to, and manifested, a sense of Britishness that is primarily a regressive one linked to history, nostalgia and stasis.

The British government's project of Cool Britannia set about updating this partial portrait of British fashion with renewed images and iconography that relied less on delving into Britain's past and more on constructing, and representing, the diversity of British fashion and the British multi-cultural nation. Paul Smith, and his fusion of classic and modern styling sold under the banner of British individualism, was at the



forefront of this project. So too, was Alexander McQueen and if we refer once more to the Blueblood Beauties, we see that this image, with its fusion of styles and codings quite purposefully goes about challenging the terms in which Britain is placed on the global fashion map. What is especially important, however, is the way that the Beauties picture, in offering an innovative and progressive route to representing a 'cool' Britain does not, in so doing, disavow and eradicate from view entirely the longstanding, age old signifiers of Britishness. The past is not forgotten but rather is reworked in more inclusive, extensive - even more sophisticated - ways. For example, the Beauties picture plays on the idea of the traditional 'Union' colours of red, white and blue, but it is a subtle reference denoted by the colourings of the props and clothing featured, rather than by a brash Union Jack-waving Britannia or John Bull. Far from being dismissed as irrelevant and unrealistic, then, the ideas of an older camped-up-imperial-style-Britishness continue to inhabit a powerful niche in the geographical imagination and remain as enduring forces in the British-Japanese circuit of style.

Not only does this tell us that fashion exports have to be carefully niche marketed in order to tap into the particularities and preferences of local (Japanese) markets but the strength of these culturally-derived imaginings also tells us that British fashion exports (to Japan) are about far more than profit maximisation and an economically-driven form of global expansion. Rather my discussion in chapter four again highlights the idea that the globalisation of British fashion involves a complex range of *cultural* nuances. Thus we see how imaginative geographies play a crucial part in fashion exports, particularly from Britain to Japan, where economic viability poses substantial barriers to doing business and where British fashion is therefore first and foremost a culturally-fronted transaction.

The power of these connotational codes went on to form a major part of my discussion in chapter five concerning the class-related discourses of Britishness. For Britishness has been bound up with an aura of snobbishness exploited in the commercial arena through the commodification and sale of the unique British class system. As Netherwood (1990: 10) argues, (Anglo-)British high society is "a powerful myth: and for the marketing boys, a heaven-sent one...a commodity that the snobbish Europeans, the rootless Americans and the label-hungry Japanese would give the shirts off their backs for: class - true-blue English class". British fashion has therefore come to be inextricably linked with notions of a sovereign state and its attendant class hierarchy. These notions are mobilised by the lifestyling of fashion brands and by symbolic production techniques that portray certain commodities as positional goods prized not only because of their high economic value but also because of their ability to generate cultural capital, class cachet - and thereby a related sense of Britishness - through ownership.

My discussion posited Mulberry as one of these aspirational brands and as a company that bore out the Bourdieuan idea of fashion as a means to socio-economic distinction, and taste as a domain reserved exclusively for members of the middle to upper echelons of society. Mulberry has borrowed from, and bolstered, a pre-existing class-related geography as part of its corporate construction of an élite way-of-life. For example, the company identifies with the prestigious landscapes of London's Bond Street and the British Crown Heartland, and with an exclusive rural idyll located in the geographical south of England. Such identifications show that in certain niches of the British fashion industry, a powerful link is perceived to exist between social status, geographical location and the amplitude of one's national belonging.

However, this link, which has reduced Britishness to a caricatured image personified via the country gentleman and located against a backdrop of the Home Counties, has been somewhat overplayed and the correspondence between certain social groups and certain landscapes has been overstated. Therefore, my discussion in chapter five also examined how conventional class-based analyses of (British) fashion only address one niche of the British consumption landscape and how what are termed as emerging 'alternative taste communities' display an inability to fit into these analyses. Rather, the new taste communities are part of a countercultural movement in which the ability to invest in symbolic forms of distinction (such as fashion) is said to be less a class privilege and more a question of cultural and stylistic expertise or of 'being in the know'. Paul Smith has been an influential force in the mobilisation of this knowingness and appeals to a varied class and age profile of consumers who seek a more sophisticated means through which to articulate their personal identity beyond the ostentatious consumption and display of conspicuous brands. The Paul Smith consumer - the style autodidact - is positioned away from the high fashion crowd, inhabiting those diverse consumption spaces that are found off the beaten track and that reveal a discriminating taste sensibility. For example, Smith's Covent Garden location in London and his affiliation with the marginal spaces of Nottingham's Lace Market enable strategies of autodidacticism. The unusual siting of outlets in what are 'cool', slightly quirky, locations are direct rejections of both the uniformity of the mass market and the prescriptiveness of high class brands. The new taste communities go about inverting and confusing mainstream ideas of tastefulness and stylishness by drawing on that which has been normatively cast as tacky or kitsch. There is a deliberate playing - and playfulness - on aesthetic conventions, a valorising of that which is deemed low-brow and a cynical disdain for money and good taste in what is the calculated - the knowing -

disruption of the mainstream. This disruption, in turn, signals a consumer sophistication in which emerging taste communities reveal a style consciousness quite apart from the mass-consuming populace. The emphasis here is on individualism, with this individualism criss-crossing class boundaries.

The *Blueblood Beauties* again illustrates this point through the disruption of fashion's class conventions in several ways. Perhaps most pertinently, the *Beauties* picture plays explicitly on iconic signifiers of Britishness with the witty subversion of traditional bearskins, military paraphernalia, ceremonial accoutrements and even the quintessentially British stately home (the backdrop to the photograph is Blenheim Palace<sup>30</sup>, Oxfordshire) pointing to an ironic knowingness in which the sanitised, touristic images of a sovereign state are quite literally re-presented in a more subversive context alongside the irreverent low-brow images of punk and sexual profanity. This mixing of the sacred and the profane is a typical autodidactical strategy that aims to shock through the reuniting of tastes that normatively remain opposed. The bearskins and sentry boxes are also part of a traditional - and uncool - version of Britain and have been appropriated in this particular image precisely because of their uncool status in a bid to re-enchant that which has been ostracised, disavowed and deemed worthless by the majority. In a similar vein, the title of this picture, the *Blueblood Beauties*, is also significant, since this is again an ironic reference, this time to the aristocratic

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<sup>30</sup> Blenheim Palace is a national landmark. A gift from Queen Anne to the great national military hero, John, 1<sup>st</sup> Duke of Marlborough, it was built between 1705 and 1722. More recently, Blenheim Palace has come to be known as the birthplace of Sir Winston Churchill, another war hero and grandson of the 8<sup>th</sup> Duke of Marlborough. It is very much a family seat and is now home to the 11<sup>th</sup> Duke.

connections of the models featured<sup>31</sup> coupled with an ironic challenge to societal concepts of beauty, femininity and the idea of the aristocratic English rose.

So we again see how the Blueblood Beauties image, together with the ironic and knowing strategies bound up within it, go about breaking down and then reinventing the nature of Britishness in a commercial setting. What have come to be the tired clichés of a nation gazing at its imperial past are brought up-to-date through the use of juxtaposition, mixing and diversity. This vogue for diversity appeared as a key thread in chapter six where I discussed how the opening up of consumption spaces has brought about a problematising of the polarised certainties on which much of British identity and national belonging has previously been based. Some parts of the fashion industry have, for example, been extremely influential in ritualising and standardising an androcentric vision of Britishness that places the heterosexual male in authoritative and dominant social roles. However, the transformations taking place in production, retailing and consumption - the post-Fordist practices and a more demanding, knowingly individualistic consumer - suggest that new terms are being set in which the ambiguities and diversity of identities are gathering momentum and are increasingly visible. Chapter six examined these emerging ambiguities in relation to gender. In particular it examined how the, previously unthinkable, idea of a consuming and fashionable British male, reflects a broadening of acceptable roles, definitions and codes of masculinity. In a similar vein, and as the Blueblood Beauties illustrates here, fashion has also seen a diversification in the representations of, and meanings for, women. No

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<sup>31</sup> Palmer is the great-granddaughter of Pamela, Lady Glenconner, who is one of the three sisters in John Singer Sargeant's portrait *The Wyndmon Sisters*. Fraser is of the Lovat Frasers, once one of Scotland's wealthiest clans. Kidd is a great-granddaughter of Lord Beaverbrook and Guinness is not only a scion of the famous Anglo-Irish brewing family but also the granddaughter of a German princess, Marie-Gabrielle von Urach of Württemberg, and the great-granddaughter of one of the Mitford sisters.

longer cast solely in roles to do with domestic drudgery or frivolous ornamentation, fashion is becoming a site of refuge and revenge from fixed gender dictates. For example, the female models in the *Beauties* picture embody the notion of ironic distance and go about parodying their own consummate British breeding and aristocratic connections through a knowing and witty aesthetic. In so doing, the *Beauties* display large quantities of cultural capital and a high level of socio-cultural sophistication that goes about disrupting mainstream feminine mores and posing powerful alternatives to the romance-seeking, submissive young lady intent on blindly following the latest fashion trends. Rather, the models featured here portray a closer resemblance to the *ladettes* I discussed in chapter six (section 6.4) in that they embody a cruder, more lustful and desiring sense of femaleness. Their ripped shirts, tattered hems and frays display a disregard, a cynical disdain, for tastefulness and grooming whilst their appropriation of what is the staunchly male domain of military regimental tradition points to a confrontation and to a redrawing of gender boundaries.

The blurring of these gender boundaries, as well as the boundaries of class, geographical locales and cultural groupings that I have examined over the course of this thesis suggest that British fashion is a site 'on the margins', across which a wide variety of (national) identity politics are played out. The *Blueblood Beauties* picture offers a blueprint for the representation of this marginality by constructing a hybrid sense of Britishness, one that shows how the identities bound up in British fashion are more extensive and more complex than solely those of Anglo-centric, middle-class country gentlemen dressed in hunting jackets and brogues and gazing backwards to a gloriously idealised past. Rather than this single, neatly bounded definition, British fashion might be more convincingly characterised for the twenty-first century by its narratives of

ambiguity, with these ambiguities forming the shape of, and representing, Britishness, in all of its diversity, for the future.

## APPENDIX ONE

### Overview of MULBERRY PLC

#### **Managing Director**

Roger Saul - founder, managing director, designer-in-chief.

Born 1950, Lottisham, Somerset, UK.

Educated at Kingswood School, Bath. Captained the school rugby and athletics teams and was Somerset U17 400m champion.

1968 won scholarship to Westminster College, London to read Business Studies.

1969 appointed Trainee Accessory Buyer at John Michael, Carnaby Street.

#### **Established**

Mulberry established 1971 in Chilcompton, Somerset, UK.

Saul formed the company with initial capital of £500, a 21<sup>st</sup> birthday present from his parents. A family-run business, Saul borrowed his father's (who was a foreman at Clarks, the Somerset shoe factory) expertise in the local craft of leather working and tanning. Saul's mother, Joan, was a director for many years. Monty Saul, Roger's wife, is Mulberry's Human Resources director.

#### **Shops**

Five Mulberry stand-alone shops in the UK.

1982 first Mulberry retail shop opened in St. Christopher's Place, London. Current flagship is on Bond Street. Over 50 Mulberry shops located in 22 different countries around the globe. 500 ready-to-wear wholesale accounts and 800 wholesale Home collection accounts worldwide.

#### **Style**

Designer country classics.

Mulberry is synonymous with a traditional huntin', shootin' and fishin' look. The brand is a favourite among the county set and pitches its leather goods, accessories and designer ready-to-wear ranges at high-income professionals. Mulberry is an aspirational lifestyle brand and frequently draws inspiration from the 1920s and 30s with deeply nostalgic designs and images of a bygone age - think steam trains, country estates and fine living. Price tags reflect the high quality and also the pretensions of Mulberry goods: expect to pay £35 for a washbag and over £3,000 for a leather trunk.

#### **Previous Form**

Mulberry made its name with handmade leather belts and handbags of exceptional quality.

1979 received Queen's Award for Industry in recognition of its export success.

1988 exported 80% of its production and had an annual turnover of £6.8 million.

#### **Current Status**

Struggling.

Mulberry's popularity in, and reliance upon export sales (particularly in Japan) has left the company feeling the strain inflicted by the strong pound. The pressures of a challenging economic climate have combined with Mulberry's rather 'tired' corporate image to attract media headlines such as "threadbare Mulberry" (Halstead, 1997:9) and "dowdiest retailer" (Abrahams, 1998:52).

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London  
W1Y 9HB  
Telephone: 020 7491 4323



## APPENDIX TWO

### Overview of PAUL SMITH LTD

#### Managing Director

Paul Smith - founder, managing director, designer-in-chief.

Born 1946, Nottingham, UK.

Keen to become a professional cyclist, Smith suffered an accident at the age of 18. With his career intentions dashed and without qualifications he became a gofer at a local clothing warehouse in Nottingham.

#### Established

1970 Smith opened first shop in Byard Lane, Nottingham.

Smith formed company with a few hundred pounds savings. Took evening classes at local polytechnic and produced own designs with help from his longterm partner, Pauline Denyer, an RCA graduate in fashion.

1976 began trading under Paul Smith label and showed first formal collection in Paris.

#### Shops

10 Paul Smith shops in the UK (Nottingham, Manchester and London x 8).

Smith has outlets and concessions in 42 different countries around the globe. Most remarkable is the Paul Smith empire in Japan where there are over 200 shops including a 3000 square feet flagship store in Tokyo. 80% of turnover comes from export accounts.

#### Style

Quirky classics and tailoring with a twist.

Paul Smith blends traditional styling and contemporary influences. Most known for his work on the male wardrobe, Smith has more recently launched successful womenswear and children's ranges. Paul Smith aims to demystify the world of fashion and to make it accessible to a diverse range of consumers who are appreciative of innovative design and good quality. Smith is most well known for his witty fashion statements and humorous designs - often using photo printing and bright colours to great effect.

#### Previous Form

Icon of British fashion.

Not afraid to depart from the élitism of the catwalk, Smith was a consultant to Marks and Spencer for 10 years.

1992 turned down Designer of the Year award in protest of the poor state and status of the fashion industry in the UK.

1995 major exhibition at Design Museum, London to chronicle and celebrate Paul Smith's contribution to the fashion business.

#### Current Status

Going from strength to strength.

Paul Smith is the country's creative industry success story. While many of Smith's contemporaries report declining sales, Smith is bucking the trend with a year on year growth of between 50% and 60% since 1993.

1998 annual worldwide turnover topped £171 million.

2000 Paul Smith knighted in Queen's birthday honours for services to fashion.

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## APPENDIX THREE

### Press Cuttings

*The Times*, 7<sup>th</sup> January, 1998 p.7 'Home News': Nigel Hawkes at the Geographers' Conference.

#### NIGEL HAWKES AT THE GEOGRAPHERS' CONFERENCE

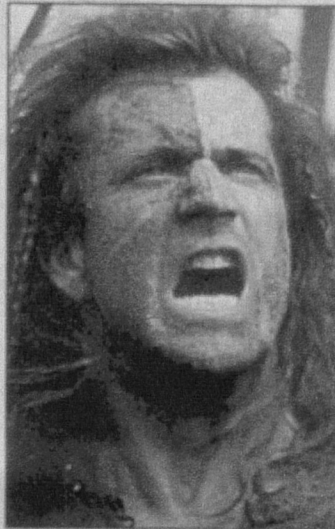
# Nations live down to their stereotypes

THE effete English and the brutal Scots came under fire yesterday as nations that were wedded to outdated and inaccurate images of themselves.

The Scots are all too ready to model themselves on the myth of *Braveheart*, the Hollywood film which portrayed them as courageous and violent, but subject to the yoke of England. Meanwhile the English allow themselves to be portrayed abroad as country gentlemen clad from top to toe in Burberry clothes, their women clinging loyally to their coat-tails.

The image of Scotland, Euan Hague of the University of Syracuse in New York State told the geographers' conference at the University of Surrey, is widely shared by adults and children in the United States. More surprisingly, it is also part of the mental fabric of Scots.

He has carried out a series of interviews in Syracuse and Edinburgh, asking people what they thought Scottishness meant. Without prompting, many cited the characters in *Braveheart*, although those interviewed in Edinburgh tended to do so



**Braveheart: Gibson is key image of Scotland**

less, and to dismiss the reference with a laugh.

Exactly the same characteristics applied to the film *Trainspotting*, Mr Hague said. Although it concerned a group of Edinburgh drug addicts, like *Braveheart* the leading characters were all white, heterosexual males capable of brutal violence.

"All believe that Scotland was or is struggling against being a colony of England, overlooking the fact that Scots played a major part in

building the British Empire — that they were colonisers themselves," he said. "In both films the only homosexual characters are English.

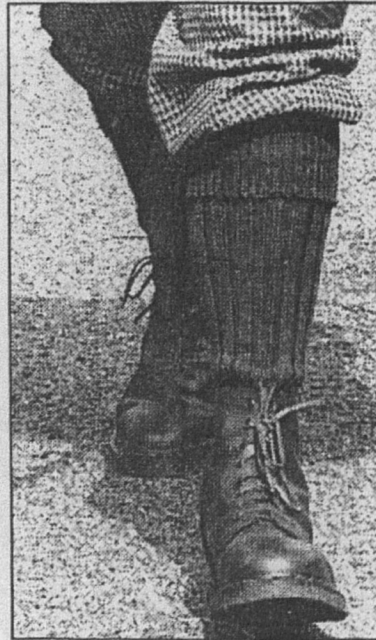
"No matter how far *Trainspotting* tried to escape from the clichés of Scottishness, it kept slipping back into them. There is no place in this imagined myth of Scotland for women, or for men who don't fit in," he said. "Scots live in one image, but are happy to depict themselves in another."

The English also came under criticism, from Alison Goodrum of Cheltenham and Gloucester College of Higher Education. She said that the image of Britishness portrayed by the fashion industry — and especially by Burberry — was male-centred and underpinned by the myth that the English lead leisured lifestyles in country houses.

Thanks to the success of Burberry, this image had become "a central signifier of Britishness". It was a staid image in which men were active, and women looked on admiringly. "But it is a very durable image, and people want to buy into it."

# Fashion

## Exports peddle imperial image



**J**APANESE men like to see themselves as 19th century English country gentlemen, complete with plus-fours, and the British "fashion" industry panders to their tastes, according to a geography researcher.

Burberry, the clothing retailer, is an example of these "elite and aspirational associations", Alison Goodrum, from Cheltenham and Gloucester college of higher education, told the conference. Many nationalities, including rich Americans, saw themselves in this way.

"Burberry exports a uniform of the country squire hinting at outdoor pursuits like hunting, shooting and fishing. It's a particularly blokey look, traditional, upright and earnest, reminiscent of the days of Empire. The female equivalent is drab and completely lacking in individuality, al-

most like an army uniform. The women's styles play a supportive role, lieutenant to the revved-up commanders."

Other parts of the British fashion industry looked for other markets, particularly in Europe, where younger more stylish people were the likely buyers.

The rich, ready-to-wear market, particularly Japan and the Far East, had a completely stereotyped view of English life.

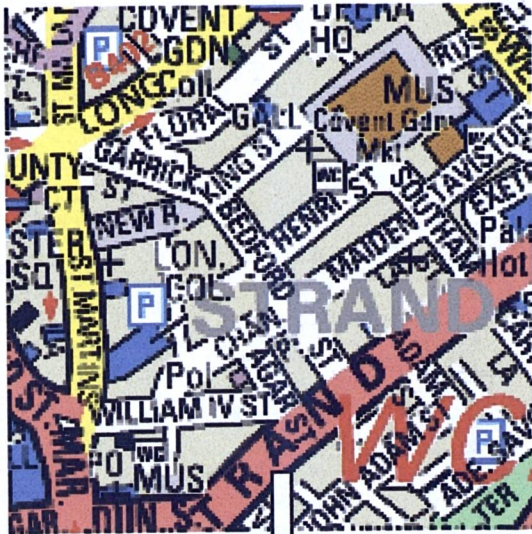
Miss Goodrum said that Burberry, with its large overseas sales, perpetuated an image of a nation in which men pushed forward with imperial projects and women were passive.

"These associations effectively reinforce and ritualise the masculine values of courage, national pride and of a pluckiness that is inherently British. Women are seen as passive, inert and backward-looking."

## APPENDIX FOUR

### Paul Smith in Covent Garden

Street map of Covent Garden, London WC2



Aerial photo of Covent Garden, London WC2



Royal Opera House

R. Newbold shop  
in Langley Court

Wholesale showroom &  
admin office, Long Acre

Covent Garden  
covered market

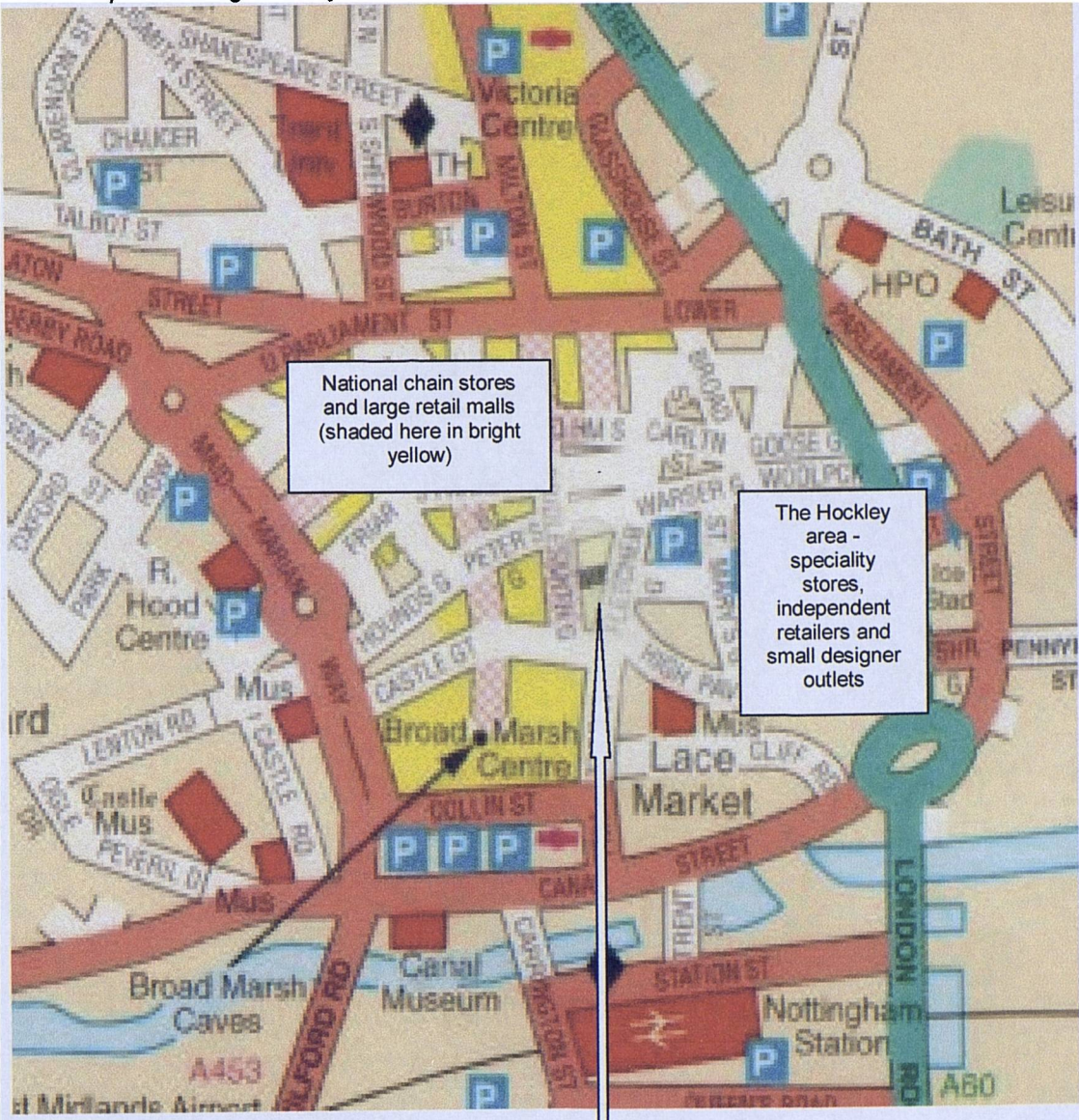
Strand

Floral Street - Paul Smith offices & menswear,  
womenswear & childrenswear stores

**APPENDIX FIVE**

**Paul Smith in Hockley, Nottingham**

*Street map of Nottingham city centre*



Paul Smith outlet on Byards Lane & site of first Paul Smith shop

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