Fashion & Ethereality

Introduction: Ethereal Bodies

Ethereality, a quality defined by lightness, insubstantiality and the supernatural is a dominant characteristic of much fashion output. It features in the passing trends for ballerina skirts, iridescent make up and sheer, rat-nibbled fabrics. On another level, ethereality is inherent in the elongated, etiolated bodies fashion privileges. In *The Model Agency*, a Channel 4 documentary that aired in March 2011, Paul Hunt, Head of Special Bookings at Premier Modelling Agency claimed that a model doesn't look like the pretty girl next door, but is instead 'ethereal' – an adjective that potentially describes someone with the physique of Tim Burton's Corpse Bride who perhaps shares that character's spectral radiance.[i] While real, earthbound bodies have fallen in and out of fashion, the prevailing ideal in the Western history of female dress has been airborne and elusive. The desire to attain and represent bodies of impossible dimensions that don't move, behave or appear like the natural body transcends the passing trends for different fashions and silhouettes. An 1850s hoop skirt, for example, is an unearthly thing – as anyone who has worn one will know, it surrounds its wearer like a UFO, creaking and undulating. Even more uncannily, it conceals the wearer's feet, making her literally float across the room. Contemporary fashion videos similarly feel like records from life on other planets, as bodies loom large, spiral, or dissolve into glitter before your eyes. In this paper I will explore how and why fashion evokes the ethereal using both historic and contemporary examples. Are the makers of impossible, dream-like fashion imagery simply pandering to every woman's inner Morgan le Fay, or is something more complex going on? The essay will focus on ethereal constructs in fashion rather than the relationship of the natural body to ethereality: although the topic of the currently fashionable wraith-like physique and its effects on consumers is an important one, it will not be discussed here.

Chapter 1 will examine the concepts of dream and desire in Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and Post-war fashion; Chapter 2 analyses the containment of female sexuality in the early 20th century *Cult of Chiffon*; Chapter 3 explores the elusive appeal of illustrator Rene Gruau and photographer Lillian Bassman's fashion images; Chapter 4 looks at the impact of ethereal fashions as live showpieces; Chapter 5 examines the storytelling potential of the ethereal, using the Enchanted Palace exhibition at Kensington Palace as a case study and finally, Chapter 6 shows how an ethereal aesthetic is at the heart of fashion video.

1.Fashion and Dream: The Poetry of the Ethereal

Rare or ethereal fashion images like chiffon scarves or perfume advertisement photographs shot in soft-focus evoke the nebulous quality of our thoughts and day dreams. Trying to conjure a mental image of absent friends Jean Paul Sartre observed that the daydreamed faces lacked vivacity, seeming 'thin', 'dry', and 'two dimensional'.[ii] Yet, as Elaine Scarry has shown, when instructed by an authoritative text, the thin shadows of our daydreams brighten and move.[iii] Writers use several techniques to enable us to create vivid imaginary worlds,

and one of the most effective is the manipulation of incorporeal substances including light, cloth and shadow – all of which are as weightless and malleable as thought itself.[iv] Scarry observes that in *Madame Bovary* the eponymous heroine's romantic escapades - both imagined and real - are aligned with her weakness for the trader Monsieur Lheureux's rare and exotic wares. Trying to peddle a selection of chiffon scarves to the susceptible Emma Bovary, Lheureux sends the fine silks into a dance:

'From time to time, as though to brush off a bit of dust, he gave a flick of a fingernail to the silk of the scarves, lying there unfolded to their full length; and they quivered and rustled under his touch, their gold sequins gleaming like little stars in the greenish light of the dusk.'[v]

Mediated through Gustave Flaubert's prose, the scarves' dance is vivid indeed: animated by Lheureux's flicking motion these luxury objects become almost anthropomorphic, 'quiver(ing)' and 'rustl(ing)' like a lady in silk. They are further elevated by the simile comparing their twinkling sequins to stars, making it seem that a celestial parade is emblazoned upon these textiles. Manipulated by Lheureux the scarves do not only become the physical site upon which Emma projects her daydreams and aspirations to a grander, more elegant life, but enthral the reader with their hypnotic motion. Drawn into the scene, we too believe that the scarves signify opulence and exoticism.

Like Lheureux, Flaubert's masterly *metteur en scene*, fashion advertisers often encourage us to invest inanimate ethereal objects with our desires. An advertisement for Celanese, an artificial silk acetate fibre featured in a April 1948 edition of British *Harper's Bazaa*r instructs readers to: 'Daydream in Celanese...' and goes onto to describe the nature of the dream: 'Sometimes it is a dream evoked by the memory of the cool caress of a nightgown in Celanese satin or the intriguing whisper of a dress in Celanese taffeta'.[vi] Embellished solely by a linear illustration, the unprepossessing advertisement relies upon its purple prose to beguile the reader. In a more direct manner than Flaubert, the text instructs the consumer to project her fantasies of being admired in acres of fine silk onto the synthetic fabric. The fabric promises to deliver the sensual coolness of silk satin and even the synaesthetic 'whisper' of silk taffeta - all the benefits of the real thing without the expense of importing or paying for it. Moreover, it is British Celanese, rather than foreign silk so the wearer can indulge safe in the knowledge that she is doing her patriotic duty by supporting British industry. Given that war time privations meant that skirts were short, narrow and boxy and that fabric rationing continued until 1953, in 1948 the promise of non-utilitarian luxury fabrics like taffeta and satin felt like a dream indeed. Since Christian Dior's seminal *Corolle* line of 1947 (termed the New Look by *Harper's Bazaar* editor Carmel Snow), which featured 'flower women' with 'hand-span waists' and full circle skirts requiring up to 17 yards of fabric, women were encouraged to equate opulent fabrics with peacetime prosperity and restored femininity.[vii] Apparently no longer required to drive tractors and run factories, women of fashion could return to the traditional milieu of the decorative pedestal.

'Metaphors of magic', Jill Fielding notes, are profuse in Post-war lingerie advertisements, where the constrictive undergarments needed for a 'hand-span waist' float mid air so that readers can 'recognise the transformative erotic power these garments confer'.[viii] Yet,

following the shortages of war, fabrics and dress-making also became imbued with magical properties. In both Post-war film and fashion the tale of *Cinderella* where the eponymous heroine emerges from the ashes of drudgery through elaborately costumed metamorphoses became especially significant. In the Disney film of *Cinderella* (1950) dressmaking scenes are profuse. [ix] The creation of a garment whether it is by singing mice or wand-waving fairy godmothers is equated with the restoration of hope, while the destruction of a garment by jealous stepsisters or at the breaking of a spell signifies despair. It is masquerading as a great lady in the ethereal fashions of fairy-made dress and glass slippers that Cinderella enchants the prince, who recognises her sublimated beauty. Dior saw himself as an heir to the 17th century *Cinderella* author Charles Perrault's tradition of the *merveilleux* or fantastic. He claimed that in his opulent skirts 'Girls could safely feel that they had all the trappings of a fairytale princess to wear.' [x] Though varying in tone, a caption from Disney's *Cinderella* (fig.1) and a photograph of Christian Dior's New Look by Richard Avedon for *Harper's Bazaar* (fig. 2) convey a similar message: 'Ladies note that gentlemen respond to the fairytale femininity of swirling skirts'. Anxiety belies this playful Cinderella ideal: in an era where demobbed soldiers were returning to work and therefore reducing women's opportunities for economic independence, catching the eye of a prince could be key to salvation from poverty and need. Tapping into women's romantic desire for love and admiration along with their practical need for survival, the Post-war fashion industry invested much in the dream of a new dress.

Fig.1

Fig. 2

Dressing to beguile: A full-skirted Cinderella and her Prince from Disney's *Cinderella* (fig.1) Renée, the New Look of Dior, Place de la Concorde, Paris 1947 by Richard Avedon for *Harper's Bazaar* (fig.2)

2. A Dream Woman: Early 20th Century Boudoir Dressing

Ethereal fashions have a complex relationship with sexuality, gender and the body: on the one hand the air-borne quality of ethereal garments denies the body, rendering it sexless like that of Shakespeare's Ariel, while on the other hand sheer, shimmering fabrics, shell-like frills and whirling scarves exaggerate curves, creating an aura of sensual, feminine mystique.

At the beginning of the 20th century writers such as Mrs Eric Pritchard in *The Cult of Chiffon* (1902) promoted the image of the seductive, yet respectable woman by praising the trend for diaphanous silk garments including tea-gowns (worn to entertain friends) and pretty undergarments (worn to entertain husbands). Mrs Pritchard encourages her readers to relinquish the starchy white petticoats and bloomers of their prim Victorian forbears in favour of undergarments like the couturier Lucile's, which were 'as delicate as cobwebs and as beautifully tinted as flowers'.[xi] In earlier eras, Mrs Pritchard specifies, alluring undergarments were consigned to those 'whose profession is seduction'.[xii] However, as a result of *The Cult of Chiffon* the 'pretty arts and subtleties' of the coquettes can and should be practiced by respectable women.[xiii] Belying this invitation to be seductive is Mrs Pritchard's anxiety about male infidelity and prostitution. She implies that it is a wife's duty to be alluring so that her husband does not stray.

Pritchard introduces *The Cult of Chiffon* to her potentially bashful and inexperienced readers through the trope of Christianity. Both the 'Cult of Chiffon' and 'the Christian religion' 'insist that the invisible is more important than the visible'.[xiv] Mrs Pritchard's comparison is of course problematic: Christianity deals with truly invisible mysteries, whereas our author refers to garments that are worn at private occasions where they are 'invisible' to the public at large, but conspicuously 'visible' to select spectators. However, for our purposes it is important that Mrs Pritchard's comparison not only sublimates garments which enhance the attractions of the flesh, but renders a woman's private dressing rituals as sacred as spiritual faith.

In order to be poetic and inoffensive, the wearer of chiffon trappings, according to Mrs Pritchard must possess 'an individual type of beauty of the ethereal type'- she must be slim, as exaggerated hips and busts violently sabotage the illusion of spiritual incorporeality.[xv] Mrs Pritchard thus ultimately presents ethereal beauty as intrinsic to the beholder and unachievable by fashion alone. Throwing all perceived deformities into relief, sheer garments merely act as embellishments to those who are already perfect. Indeed, the wearer of the 'ideal tea gown with its flowery chiffons and laces built on the lines of Ancient Greek drapery' is not a real woman, but a phantom 'lady of (Mrs Pritchard's) dreams'.[xvi] By conceiving of a 'dream' icon Mrs Pritchard renders her *Cult* elite, elusive and ever more attractive to the discerning consumer, who is drawn to its air of exclusivity.

A variation on Mrs Pritchard's 'dream woman' appears in lingerie advertisements from the first half of the 20th century, which feature airborne garments, rounded out by phantom figures devoid of flesh or personality. As Fielding notes, this invests the 'empty garments'

with 'erotic corporeality' reinforcing the patriarchal assumption that female sexuality is depersonalised and can be worn and removed at will like a mask.[xvii] With their surreal elegance, the faceless mannequins in a 1931 editorial feature from Paris *Vogue* titled *La Relation entre la lingerie et les robes*, which likens fashionable lingerie to evening wear, are figures of respectable female sensuality.[xviii] (fig. 3) In this article, the consumer is not only permitted, but encouraged to revel in the seductiveness the lingerie will lend her. However, the facelessness of the mannequins and text's sole concentration on the lingerie means that the reader is directed to contain her sensuality within the parameters of the garments and the mannered bed-time routine they prescribe.

Fig. 3

An invisible woman: a sketch of a faceless mannequin from *La Relation entre la lingerie et les robes. Vogue* (Paris), January 1931. Illustrator unspecified.

3. The white and the black: the mid 20th century images of Lillian Bassman and Rene Gruau

Crucial to the ethereal's allure is its intrinsic elusiveness. Airy and indeterminate, ethereal images provoke us to question and imagine, rather than digest a solid perceptual world. The fashion illustrations of Rene Gruau and the photographs of Lillian Bassman from the late 1940s and 1950s are particularly characterised by large areas of blank space or blurred, sketchy lines, rendering the women that inhabit them apparitions who float mid-page. There are often striking similarities between the graphic compositions of Gruau and Bassman - consider especially an advert for *Diorama* perfume (1950) (fig.4) and the image of Suzy Parker in *Harper's Bazaar* (April 1952) (fig.5) where the illustrated and photographed models become human lily pads against a blank background. Given that Gruau's images were widely publicised, one can speculate that Bassman accessed the *Diorama* advertisement, and adapted its motif for a feature article on the model Suzy Parker: the individual lily petals, a poetic metaphor for ladies' fingers, become actual fingers in Bassman's photograph. The star of an article called 'Suzy Parker - a report to skeptics', the expressive Parker becomes a pert pastiche of Gruau's demure lily.

Fig.4

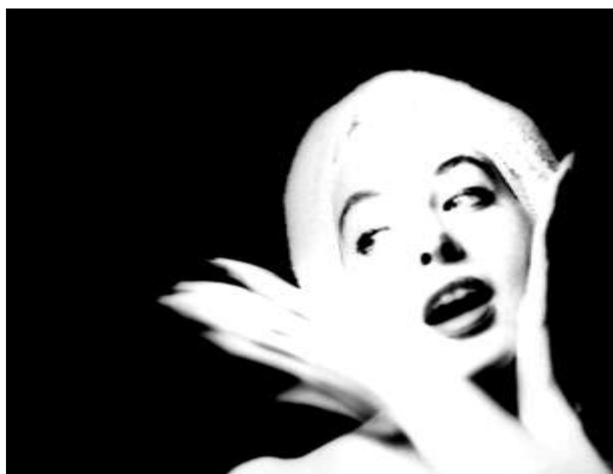

Fig.5

Lilies: An advertisement for *Diorama* perfume by Christian Dior, illustrated by Rene Gruau, 1950 (fig.4). A photograph for the article 'Suzy Parker - A report to skeptics', *Harper's Bazaar*, April 1952 (fig.5).

Bassman and Gruau often isolate a centre of focus in their work, leaving the rest blank or nebulous. This blank space becomes imaginative space for the spectator, who projects their thoughts and desires onto it. Ulf Poschardt claims that Gruau's sketchy lines and vacancies 'render his women's image accessible to the projections of women observers, who... reconstruct in their imaginations a new whole from the fragmentary composition'.[xix] Poschardt's observation is apt from a psychological point of view. As Marina Warner observes, the mind's 'unfinished' or 'developing' state attracts it to seemingly 'infinite' images, which leave space for creation on the spectator's part.[xx]

Arguably, Bassman and Gruau's women are themselves infinite: with their linear outlines and Mannerist poses which emphasise their swan-necks and tapering fingers, they have a timeless, eternally feminine appeal. Simultaneously no-woman and every-woman, they are apparitions of stockinged leg in Gruau's illustrations or mysterious wraiths whose faces are obscured by hat brims and other accessories in Bassman's photographs. These hieroglyphs of female beauty encourage female spectators to emulate their 'timeless' qualities which promise an escape from not only the ugliness or blandness of the flesh, but from its putrefaction. Fielding warns of the potentially damaging effect of such emulation, which causes the female spectator's own (natural) body to 'disappear to fill the empty space on the page'.[xxi] When presented with images of enigmatic bodily perfection, the spectator divorces her body from its lived experiences and wishes for a thin, superficial body, devoid of imperfection, suffering or narrative.

Examining the work of Bassman and Gruau in more detail however, one observes graphic similarities but conceptual differences. While Gruau is wholly aligned to the glamorous facade of fashion and its elusive essence, fashion is secondary in Bassman's work, which is largely a projection of her interior vision.

The butterfly signifies the transformative potential of glamour in Gruau's work. According to Poschardt, Gruau believed that the role of fashion illustration was to offer fashion 'the reality of a dream, the dream that, in a way constitutes the eternal task of fashion'.[xxii] In his illustrated advertisements for Dior, Gruau's butterfly women hover bright against a backdrop of a half-open door or a blockade of dark suits. In fig. 6 a woman in red resembling a butterfly still crumpled from her chrysalis, stretches out her wing-like cape before a crowd of admirers. Given the woman's contorted posture and hovering stance, it is implied that the moment will last just a second, but this is just the point. In the manner of Dior, who conceived of a new line for each collection, Gruau dreamt up different compositions for his instants of glamour, thus combining his veneration of classic elegance with ever more fluid conceptions of beauty. Gruau's ethereal women of the 1940s and 50s are the spirit of fashion itself – the butterfly being a symbol of fashion's joyful and ephemeral qualities.

Fig. 6 **Fig. 7**

Butterfly women: An illustration by Rene Gruau for Dior, c.1950 (fig. 6). A photograph by Lillian Bassman for *Harper's Bazaar*, May 1949 (fig. 7).

Bassman too evokes a butterfly in a photograph of the model Barbara Mullen wearing a chiffon Robert Piguet dress.(fig.7) Mullen arches her elbow before a mirror 'to resemble the shape of a butterfly' for a May 1949 photograph for *Harper's Bazaar*. This results in the dress disappearing into the reflections until we are left with something resembling a hazy chiffon star. Alas, the photograph remained unpublished as Bassman's editor Carmel Snow, who liked to see every button and bow, asked her to reshoot the dress so that the designer's intention could become more evident. Like Gruau, Bassman was enchanted by fashion's potential for metamorphosis - the idea that a demure chiffon yellow dress in the shape of a column could hold the promise of butterfly-like pageantry and freedom. However, while Gruau regards female beauty from the distance of a male admirer, Bassman identifies with her models and establishes a close rapport with them. Travelling about Paris with Barbara Mullen on a photo shoot for *Harper's Bazaar* in the Spring of 1949, Bassman bonded with her model, and marvelled at her ability to transform before the camera: 'put (Barbara Mullen) under the lights and she's just bloom... (in) every photograph I ever did of her... there was nothing beautiful about her. But put her under the lights, get her to move, get that throat to come up and she was glorious'.[xxiii] The 1949 shots of the Paris collections are thus more connected with Mullen's 'blooming' before the camera than with the fashions themselves, which are depicted in blurred outlines and from unorthodox angles.[xxiv] Whereas Gruau's women fulfil Roland Barthes's premonition that the 'model becomes the fashion' and is thus inextricable from the (clearly delineated) garment or style she represents, Bassman's figures are more complex, expressing themselves and the photographer's vision, whilst still retaining an air of mystery.[xxv] This is largely a result of Bassman's elaborate darkroom process – her

obliteration of extraneous detail through bleaching, retouching and developing images through gauze. As Deborah Solomon who analyses Bassman's photographs of women in hats observes, the photographer uses fashion features and accessories to make interiority visible.[xxvi] For example, a net veil, which appears as a swarm of dots before the eyes, undermines the model's serene posture and gives her myriad thoughts form. Of her photographs, Bassman said 'I was interested in creating a new kind of vision aside from what the camera saw'[xxvii], a vision that her good friend and fellow photographer Richard Avedon described as 'the heart breaking place between the appearance and disappearance of things'.[xxviii]

Like Gruau, Bassman used the language of the spare, dashing and elegant to convey the fleeting moment of an apparition, but she focused more on depicting her personal vision than the spirit of fashion. This might account for the fact that her models are pensive, where Gruau's are coquettish. Interestingly in the late 1990s, Bassman developed new photographs from her negatives of the 1940s and 50s for a series of exhibitions. In these reprints she goes even further in pursuit of her vision, obliterating the extraneous details of 1950s fashion to better exhibit the pictures' overriding spirit.

4. Showpieces: Live Ethereality

The showpiece, whether a catwalk creation or a traditional wedding dress, is a live ethereal vision – something intended to overwhelm an audience and transport them to another time or place.

The Haute Couture showpiece, a garment that is entirely hand-sewn and unique, encompasses the beguiling legends of a single designer's vision and his or her cloistered fairy-fingered seamstresses – concepts that are rare in ready-to-wear pieces, which are produced by a design team and globalised work force. In the past, the showpiece has been voluminous, gravity defying, reliant upon light projections for full effect, and generally unwearable. Its very inability to translate to even the most glamorous of real-life situations makes its brief spell on the catwalk even more poignant. As Caroline Evans observes 'the showpiece is spectral. Worn for just a few seconds by the model on the catwalk , after its disappearance the memory of it can fade slowly, like a retinal image after the real object has gone'[xxix]. However, the more brilliant and supernatural the spectre, the more its image is revived by the media. It is most magical witnessed live or encountered in hearsay and least magical as a two-dimensional image on newsprint. Accessible to all in its flattened and digitally enhanced form the showpiece arguably loses the glamour of its first apparition, and the designer goes back to the drawing board to create a new spectacle. Viewed from a distance, however, after the passing of a few years, the sudden re-apparition of a showpiece beguiles spectators all over again.

Alexander McQueen's 'Oyster' dress, first seen on the catwalk of his Spring/Summer 2003 *Irere* collection based on the theme of shipwreck, is a showpiece that has withstood the test of time. (fig. 8) A garment of breathtaking intricacy inside out, as Andrew Bolton, curator of the *Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty* exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art explains, the dress 'is made up of hundreds and hundreds of layers of silk organza, almost like a mille-feuille pastry'.[xxx] As a garment it marks the beginning of McQueen's interest in achieving softness and lightness through draping.[xxxi] Yet despite its ethereal appearance, the asymmetric dress is a sartorial ruin and possesses a macabre quality. At the fashion show, where the dress first appeared, the bedraggled hair and smeared eye-make-up of the model did much to confirm the juxtaposition of lightness and deathly immersion. Sarah Burton, McQueen's successor notes that McQueen wanted it to appear 'almost like (the model) drowned—and the top part of the dress is all fine boning and tulle, and the chiffon is all frayed and dishevelled on the top'.[xxxii] The contemporary fashion press linked the dress to the Season's Pirate-inspired trend, and alternately described it as 'dark'[xxxiii] and 'a fairytale'[xxxiv]. Emerging from the background of McQueen's video of an underwater swimmer, the dress evoked the birth of a 21st century Venus - a bruised pearl who had survived a storm-tossed voyage. Later in 2003 dress was then purchased by the Gould Institute for the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Costume Institute, consigning it a place in history. It re-emerged this summer in the 'Romantic Primitivism' room of *Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty*, a celebration of McQueen's legacy. Both live in the exhibition on a metallic-tinted mannequin and second-hand in the photographic catalogue, *Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty*, the dress is still magnificent to behold. (fig. 9) Voluptuous in detail and yet light as a bubble, it overwhelms the imagination. After McQueen's death, the 'Oyster' dress imbues the myth that inspired its genesis - it has survived the death of its creator and emerged all the more beautifully from it.

Fig. 8 **Fig. 9**

The 'Oyster' Dress: The 'Oyster' dress by Alexander McQueen on the Spring/Summer 2003 catwalk. Photographer unknown. (fig. 8). The 'Oyster' dress exhibited at and at *Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photographer unknown. (fig.9).

In a live catwalk show it is not just the clothes that contribute to an ethereal vision, but the models' movement and styling. Erdem Moralioglu based his Spring/Summer 2011 Collection on designs from the Victoria and Albert Museum's Ballets Russes collection. Ballet Russes set designers such as Leon Bakst and Pablo Picasso were generally famed for their typically un-balletic robust colour palettes and primitive forms. However, despite a bold use of colour and prints that were directly drawn from the Ballet Russes, Erdem's catwalk show gave the impression ethereal lightness: pubescent models with pearly complexions, their hair girlishly swept off their face, demurely circled an outdoor pavilion. Accompanied by a soundtrack from Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* (a score about a sacrificial virgin) the models in white, lace, florals and bell-shaped skirts resembled turn-of-the-century photographs of Tsar Nicholas II's daughters. (figs. 10 and 11) While the associations that one attaches to models in a catwalk show are subjective and potentially random, for the duration of a show, the combination of lighting, design and moving bodies brings forth ephemeral beings that exist only to create a spectacle for a few minutes. Thus, the creatures that models become on the catwalk are somewhat spectral in themselves. The fictions that these bodies create encourage spectators to engage more deeply with the collections and imagine that they are not composed of mere garments, but relics from a special place. Like Emma Bovary faced with Lheureux's

magisterial scarves, consumers are invited to look again, covet and possess these auratic objects.

Fig. 10 **Fig. 11**

Pubescent in white lace: A snapshot of Erdem Spring/Summer 2011 for The Daily Telegraph, January 12, 2011. Photographer unknown. (fig.10). Princess Olga Romanov (1895 – 1917) taken c.1915. Photographer unknown. (fig.11).

A showpiece that works its way into the lives of many 'ordinary women' is the wedding dress. Popularised by Queen Victoria on her marriage to Albert in 1840, the voluminous white wedding dress has become a staple of Western brides. Given that as a girl Victoria was a balletomane and records in her diary that she had met and admired the ballerina Carlotta Grisi (the first Giselle), her wedding dress may have been inspired by the filmy, white costumes of the Romantic ballet. Victoria's marriage to her cousin Albert was a love match and by emulating the style of the romantic heroines on stage (many of whom died for love), she in her dress became an icon of romantic love. The white fairytale wedding dress has been worn by women with vastly different backgrounds and outlooks than Victoria, and some have attempted to alter it, by reducing its skirts or changing its material. Nevertheless, by adopting a variant of this impractical, headily romantic garment, brides align themselves with the optimism and promise of 'happily ever after' that the vagaries of its form imply – the wedding dress is the closest that most get to the Post-War advertisers' cliché of the 'dream' garment. Brides thus do not only appear as themselves on their wedding day, but as historical figures of romantic fulfilment.

5. Capturing Real Spirits: The Enchanted Palace at Kensington

For the Enchanted Palace exhibition contemporary fashion designers were invited to Kensington Palace to create dresses for the 7 princesses who lived there. They were not, explains Enchanted Palace curator Alexandra Kim, to create dresses for ghosts or historical waxworks but fashion installations that would convey the princesses' individual essences.[xxxv]

A lively essence that evokes someone who actually existed, is difficult to generate, and requires a dialogue between the exhibits and the visitors. Had the exhibition followed the tradition of providing visitors with factual information and displaying a vast selection of the princesses' artefacts, it would have cast them as past curiosities – their spirit would have vanished amongst the historical clutter. Instead, an innovative perspective was required, as the Kensington curators invited artists and fashion designers to provide modern interpretations of the princesses through carefully constructed installations. Engaging with the princesses' lives and providing a personal interpretation of them through contemporary materials and devices, the fashion designers bridge the gap between past history and modern sensibility.

As Kim notes 'a lightness of touch' was essential in creating the characters of the absent princesses.[xxxvi] Invisible mannequins were used, and gowns often floated, arrested in motion, so that they would seem spiritual evocations of character rather than historically accurate copies. Soaring mid-flight on a staircase with black veiled candelabras, Vivienne Westwood's 'Dress of Flight', a balletic pink tulle and gold lace creation, depicts Princess Charlotte's romantic, impetuous character better than an historically accurate early 19th century Empire-line gown.[xxxvii] (fig. 12). According to Kim, Westwood's more outlandish confection would enable visitors to understand that Princess Charlotte was a rebel who married for love better than the demure, columnar gowns she would have actually worn. Meanwhile, in the 'Room of Royal Sorrows', Queen Mary's story lies somewhere between the diaphanous 'Dress of Tears' by Aminaka Wilmont, (screen-printed with the ultrasound fingers of the babies she lost) suspended from the bedposts, and the myriad glass tear bottles that fill her dressing table. (fig. 13) Visitors were invited to write about the last time they cried onto a tag and attach it to a glass bottle, thereby relating to the Queen's sorrow and imagining her as a real person rather than a figure on a timeline. Being interactive and leaving something to the imagination, the exhibition provokes the visitors to ask questions about the princesses. While the characters' remain sketched in the air but not set in stone, they become part of the visitors' mental and emotional landscape and perhaps give the impression that they had only just departed.

Fig. 12

‘A Dress of Flight’ by Vivienne Westwood. Photographer unknown.

Fig. 13

A ‘Dress of Tears’ by Aminaka Wilmont.

Photographer Unknown.

6. Becoming Ethereal : Fashion video

One of fashion's newest invocations of the ethereal is in video. Fashion video websites like Nick Knight's SHOWStudio provide behind the scenes access to the generation of fashion images, and showcase the artistry and versatility of fashion's film-makers. Moreover, by showing how fashions move and to some extent come into being, fashion video's potential to channel the ambiguity, glamour and elusiveness of the ethereal is infinite.

Exploiting the catwalk show's capacity for movement and the photograph's potential for innovative compositions, fashion video displays garments in movement without the spatial constraints of a show. Floors, walls and ceilings, the key parameters of actual rooms can be ignored, enabling fashion film-makers to chart their own paths around the collections. Without the temporal strictures of the fashion shows costume changes are instant, as the models pixellate before your eyes in shard-like pieces or spiral from one outfit to the next, transforming their skin-tone and hair in the process.

The Glow and the Gloom, a fashion film made in homage to Henri Clouzot's *L'Enfer,* which features select garments from the Spring/Summer 2011 collections, is an exercise in metamorphosis through light and colour.[xxxviii] (fig. 14) It begins film noir style, with the voice of a hypnotist and model Georgie Wass in an Alexander McQueen tuxedo, the sombre mood dictated by single items flashing silver against a black background: a cigarette mounting a column of ash; a piano keyboard viewed askance. When the hypnotist orders Wass to 'wake up', the camera sways like a pendulum and scenes of extraordinary colour appear and disappear. The garments and model are subtly integrated into the film, forming part of its hallucinogenic landscape. In one scene, for example, Wass wearing a columnar Louis Vuitton peach chiffon dress rocks back and forth in soft opaline light, mimicking the camera's movement; in another she smiles, her face emblazoned with stars; in another still, Technicolor projections stream over her face, drawing attention to a jewelled head-dress by Pebble London.

The film's most spectacular feature is its contrast of black-outs with unexpectedly lit scenes. Light is sometimes projected flame-like onto space and at other times is sourced from the model's iridescent hairs. Scarry terms this process of illumination 'radiant ignition': the sudden appearance of bright forms onto dark or blank space primes our brains to receive or create imagery and signals that 'something is happening', thus drawing us into the situation at hand.[xxxix] In literary texts where no perceptual imagery is present, the sudden illumination of objects enables readers to generate mental pictures easily. Schuller's film however, which displays illuminated objects to suddenly extinguish them, works a little differently: here, the vanished image lingers on the retina until it is replaced by another. The unpredictable illuminations and methods of presentation in Schuller's film imbue the garments featured with the aura of items pulled from a magician's hat. The film not only leads us into an ethereal hallucinogenic space, but embeds the clothes within that world, thus fulfilling its dual function of inspiration and advertisement.

Fig. 14

Radiant Ignition: Georgie Wass in *The Glow and the Gloom* by Marie Schuller. Photograph taken by http://showstudio.com/

Cygnet, a SHOWStudio film by Nick Knight exhibits shows Haute Couture 2011 gowns in movement. (fig. 16) The gowns do not trail up and down as on the catwalk, but appear in the round spiral motif that governs the film.[xl] Significantly, spiralling movement is also the leitmotif of transformation in Disney's *Cinderella*, where the heroine morphs from rags to riches at the touch of her godmother's wand.(fig. 15) In *Cinderella* the spiral's static pivot conveys the heroine's passivity (she is having things done to her), while its opulent rounds evoke earth-shifting magic and allow a 360 degree view of her outfit. A similar process is at work in *Cygnet*. Beginning as an 'ugly duckling' in a beaded metallic aluminium mesh dress by Versace, model Ming Xi spirals into swanhood through a series of six gowns and an accented singsong narrative told through the swan's perspective.

Texture is an important aspect of this video: the silks undulate under Knight's lens, making it seem as though the worms that made them are still present. The fineness of the chiffon flounced with marabou feathers on Karl Lagerfeld's gown for Chanel is displayed when the chiffon disappears before the black background, rendering the feathers fugitive. At the end of the video, when the swan tells herself to 'look at (her) reflection', her anthropomorphic opulence fades to a thin, squiggly white line, as a swan might appear in a dark lake - a poetic symbol of wish fulfilment.

In the video and accompanying narratives about the creation of each dress, Knight combines the infantilising fairytale of Haute Couture with scrupulous analysis of its definitive technical details. Knight's manner of filming a particular gown dovetails with the observations he has made on its construction. For example; Knight matches his account of how Lagerfeld's inspiration for his Couture collection was based upon the concept of lightness with a filmed shot of the transparent chiffon on the designer's gown.

Fig. 15 **Fig. 16**

Spirals transform: Disney's *Cinderella*, 1950. (fig.15) Ming Xi in Karl Lagerfeld for Chanel. Photographed by Nick Knight, 2011. (fig. 16)

About 5 minutes long, fashion videos are brief interludes into a world of sensations. As a result, they need to possess a heady immediacy if they are to capture the increasingly busy consumer's imagination. More importantly, they need to be faithful to the mercurial essence of fashion, which privileges the state of becoming over that of being. By presenting consumers with images that are always transforming, effective films both display fashion's intrinsic fluidity and evoke the infinite or unfinished state of the human mind. It is unsurprising then, that a gravity-defying, ethereal aesthetic is often applied to these filmed spectacles.

Conclusion: Ethereality - a plural aesthetic

Versatility, elusiveness and spectacle are the defining characteristics of the ethereal. Ethereal fashion items and images continue to serve their traditional function of sublimating female beauty – even in the age of fashion video the idea of metamorphosis through a spectacular gown is still very much alive. However, this is only one application of the ethereal in fashion: oscillating between appearance and disappearance, ethereal fashion images hover somewhere between the material world and the idea. As Coco Chanel, a woman who wanted to liberate her peers from frills and flounces, famously remarked 'fashion is not something that exists in dresses only. Fashion is in the sky, in the street, fashion has to do with ideas, the way we live, what is happening'[xli] Fashion, Chanel implies is alive and elusive, always one step ahead of the materials of its production and dissemination. By channelling an ethereal aesthetic, fashion designers and the makers of fashion imagery have inspired consumers and persuaded them that fashion can be not only sublimating but sublime. Through a combination of enchanting us with new airborne forms and engaging us with the mercurial and uncannily

familiar substances of thought and feeling, ethereal fashions continue to captivate us. For better or worse they are able to consume us almost as hungrily as we consume them.

Notes

[i] *The Model Agency*, March – April 2011 (Channel 4) Paul Hunt's comment on a model's ethereality was played in the introduction to each programme of *The Model Agency.*
[ii] Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Psychology of Imagination* (London: Meuthen, 1978), 179.
[iii] Elaine Scarry, *Dreaming by the Book* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999).
[iv] Marina Warner makes a similar observation on ethereal images in visual art, claiming that ethereal perceptual images work 'deeply... with cognition, providing a fantasy that leads to understanding, and then empirically, in order to support the suggestions of fantasy'. See Marina Warner, *Phantasmagoria: Spirit Visions, Metaphors and Media into the 21st Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) 77.
[v] Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, trans. Francis Steegmuller (New York: Quality Paperback Book Club, 1991), 117.
[vi] *Harper's Bazaar* (British), April 1948, 7.
[vii] Christian Dior, *Dior by Dior*, trans. Antonia Fraser (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1957), 59.
[viii] Jill Fielding, *An Intimate Affair: Women, Lingerie and Sexuality* (London: University of California Press, 2007), 177.
[ix] *Cinderella*, dir. by Clyde Geronimi, Wilfred Jackson and Hamilton Luske (1950; Walt Disney Pictures).
[x] Christian Dior cited in Marie France Pochna, *Christian Dior: the Biography*, trans. Joanna Saville (London: Duckworth Press, 2008) 156.
[xi] Lucile, Lady Duff Gordon, cited in Eleri Lynn, *Underwear: Fashion in Detail* (London: Victoria & Albert Museum, 2010), 27.
[xii] Mrs Eric Pritchard, *The Cult of Chiffon* (London: Grant Richards, 1902), 29.
[xiii] Pritchard, *Cult of Chiffon*, 29.
[xiv] Mrs Eric Pritchard, *The Cult of Chiffon* (London: Grant Richards, 1902), 15. Other contemporary manuals on boudoir dressing include the Comtesse Tramar's *Le Bréviaire de la femme. Pratiques secrètes de la beauté* (Paris : Victor Havard, 1903)
[xv] Pritchard, *Cult of Chiffon*, 34.
[xvi] Pritchard, *Cult of Chiffon*, 35.
[xvii] Fielding, *Intimate Affair*, 174.
[xviii] 'La Relation entre la lingerie et les robes', *Vogue* (Paris), January 1931, 52.
[xix] Ulf Poschardt, *Gruau* (New York: Te Neues Publishing, 1999) 7.
[xx] Warner, *Phantasmagoria*, 72.
[xxi] Fielding, *Intimate Affair*, 172-3.
[xxii] Poschardt, *Gruau,* 9.
[xxiii] Lillian Bassman, interview by Brigitte Woischnik, Oct 2007, cited in Brigitte Woischnik, *The First Retrospective: Lillian Bassman & Paul Himmel* (Hamburg: Haus der Photographie, 2010) 134.
[xxiv] Bassman's ability focus on creating an atmosphere as opposed to depicting the clothes themselves meant that she was given the less prestigious collections to shoot by *Harper's Bazaar* Editor Carmel Snow.
[xxv] Roland Barthes, *The Fashion System*, trans. Matthew Ward (London: Cape, 1985) 168.
[xxvi] Deborah Solomon, *Lillian Bassman: Women* (London: Abrams, 2009) 5.
[xxvii] Lillian Bassman, interview by Brigitte Woischnik, Oct 2007, cited in Brigitte Woischnik, *The First Retrospective: Lillian Bassman & Paul Himmel* (Hamburg: Haus der Photographie, 2010) 130.
[xxviii] Richard Avedon, cited in Brigitte Woischnik, *The First Retrospective: Lillian Bassman & Paul Himmel* (Hamburg: Haus der Photographie, 2010) 135.
[xxix] Caroline Evans cited in Judith Clark, *Spectres: When Fashion Turns Back* (London: Victoria & Albert Museum Publishing, 2004) 7.
[xxx] Andrew Bolton, '"Oyster" Dress, Irere, Spring/Summer 2003', *Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty*, http://blog.metmuseum.org/alexandermcqueen/oyster-dress-irere/ (accessed 24 Aug. 2011).
[xxxi] Sarah Burton, McQueen's successor explains that 'The skirt is made out of hundreds and hundreds of circles of organza. Then, with a pen, what Lee (Alexander McQueen) did was he drew organic lines. And then all these circles were cut, joined together, and then applied in these lines along the skirt. So you created this organic, oyster-like effect'. Sarah Burton, '"Oyster" Dress, Irere, Spring/Summer 2003', *Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty*, http://blog.metmuseum.org/alexandermcqueen/oyster-dress-irere/ (accessed 24 Aug. 2011).
[xxxii] Sarah Burton, '"Oyster" Dress, Irere, Spring/Summer 2003', *Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty*, http://blog.metmuseum.org/alexandermcqueen/oyster-dress-irere/ (accessed 24 Aug. 2011).

[xxxiii] ‘Pirata’, *Vogue* (Italia), January 2003, 160.
[xxxiv] ‘Style Crush’, *Vogue* (British), March 2003, 113.
[xxxv] Alexandra Kim, interview with author, 4 Aug, 2011.
[xxxvi] Alexandra Kim, interview with author, 4 Aug, 2011.
[xxxvii] Westwood’s gown, rechristened the ‘Dress of Flight’ for the Enchanted Palace originally appeared in a 1992 exhibition at Kensington Palace, titled *Court Couture*.
[xxxviii] The Glow and the Gloom, dir. by Marie Schuller (Aug 2011; SHOWStudio) http://showstudio.com/project/the_glow_and_the_gloom (accessed 24 Aug. 2011).
[xxxix] Scarry, *Dreaming by the Book*, 80.
[xl]‘Cygnet’, Ming Xi, Couture 2011, dir. by Nick Knight (Jul 2011; SHOWStudio) http://showstudio.com/project/ming_xi_couture_2011#fashion_film (accessed 24 Aug. 2011).
[xli] Coco Chanel, cited in Justine Picardie, *Coco Chanel: The Life and the Legend* (London: Harper Collins 2010) 190.

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