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New British Fashion Photography: Going Against the Conventionally Beautiful

La nouvelle photographie de mode britannique : 'le produit d'imaginations combinées'

Julie Morère

- 1 Nowadays, fashion photography is still often perceived in the light of a narrow theoretical framework based on political, social or economic issues. It is less often considered as art, and 'partially ostracis[ed]' rather than included 'within the broad spectrum of British art practice' (Williams 1998, 99). We will here argue that there is more to fashion photography than just the glossy pages of magazines, and that it is also a relevant entry to assess the state of Britain today. Fashion photography partially documents the spirit of the time and is given free reign even if commissioned: all artists seem to work in defiance of the materialism of the fashion industry to reach their aesthetic aims, even if they have to submit to its constraints. British fashion photography expresses the urge to reflect on the present through the relationship between fashion and photography. One of the characteristics of the condition of British fashion photography nowadays is that it is not only seen as 'a chronicler of public style' but as 'the joint product of imaginations [of] photographers, stylists, designers, constantly mediated by the fashion industry [...] [and] aware of the signals which society transmits about its public personae' in the present (Williams 1998, 99). This paper will not only consider fashion photography as a visual archiving of British style in a cultural continuum woven through various media and art forms from the 90s up to now, but also as a medium offering to the viewer the product of combined imaginations mediated by the fashion industry, so as to see how fashion photography contributes to questioning, shaping and (re)identifying the (local) British identity in a global world. Arjun Appadurai defines several notions or fluxes which characterize the contemporary world, among which 'mediascapes'¹ and 'ideoscapes'.² To Appadurai, 'Mediascapes are deemed to provide 'large and complex repertoires' of images and narratives to local groups around the world' (Robinson). 'Crucial to an understanding of these cultural flows is *the relationship*

between the forms of circulation and the circulation of forms' (Appadurai 2010). The cultural 'form' of fashion photography underlines the artificiality of the medium as well as its creative process: 'Digitalization reduces the image to a scrapyards, a jumble of shards and fragments to be cannibalised and made into new forms' (Evans 2009, 30). Contemporary British fashion photography feeds on circulating images and recycles them into new and often transgressive shots. What seems to constitute the very Britishness of contemporary British fashion photography is its lack of conventionalism or what is usually perceived as conventionally beautiful in the fashion world. We will first quickly go through some artists' images which seem to have undergone what is commonly understood as globalization i.e. cultural homogenization, while being unrecognizably British. Secondly, we will turn to the way artists treat national and aesthetic identity as an inspirational basis in the here and now (often relying on the Gothic), making of Britishness a sign of their aesthetic opposition to globalization. We will see how their take on the global brings them closer to what Robertson called 'glocalization,' i.e. the preservation of local considerations, hovering between national taste and global trends and foregrounding a sense of cultural belonging. Thirdly, we will argue there is a form of fluidity to British identity which is congenial to such hybrid genres as fashion and documentary photography. Lastly, we will observe how various techniques (the analogue and the digital or mixed media) may deconstruct the idea of a stable collective British identity and debunk the clichés often linked to what fashion photography is supposed to be.

- 2 Some pictures can be more easily read than others. Several 21st-century fashion photographers have chosen to focus exclusively on clothes, the primary object of fashion photography. Born in 1966, David Sims was part of the renaissance of British photography in the early nineties with minimal background and flat studio lighting reflecting the decade's stark aesthetic. Many fashion images may look sleek, austere, and globally all - the same—same light, same voluptuous, apathetic or disengaged attitudes—whatever the brand, nation, or magazine they are for, whether they deal with high or low fashion (haute couture or popular brands), the clothes only making a difference as in Daniel Jackson's recent photo shoots. Josh Olins is a younger photographer, but his images have something of the 1980s, displaying beauty, sexuality, seduction and desire, and isolation simultaneously, a common feeling in 21st-century Western society which is illustrated in his shots of David Beckham, the most globally branded soccer player in the world. The name conjures up variously strong cultural and identity groups (Mancunian, Madrilenian, Angeleno), and he models stark bodywear for H&M, a Swedish fast-fashion multinational, in a pared-down setting. The campaign does not rely on a fashion story or a narrative dimension. Trying to make sense of the world around him through the way he captures choreographed movement, Jacob Sutton's work for its part stars youthful models in plain settings in which the viewer's imagination can roam freely.
- 3 The glossiness of these pictures seems to have no cultural root and might have been taken by photographers of indifferent nationalities. They reflect the cultural homogenization which is often associated with mass consumerism and the media age, Westernization, or Americanization. However, recent socio-cultural works like Arjun Appadurai's have insisted on the necessity to apprehend modernity from a 'transnational' point of view (Assayag 2003). Appadurai sees the world as a discontinuous space with fewer and fewer boundaries, crossed by interpenetrating fluxes of information and images circulating fragmentarily but freely. The point of this paper is to observe how British artistic identities stand out in a globalizing world, and how, conversely, singular and

creative forms may integrate global facts *hic et nunc*. Beneath the surface, there is more to these pictures than first meets the eye. Another way to consider them would be to see them in the light of the four phenomena triggered by globalization: ‘instantaneity, interconnection, interchangeability and interdependence’ (Dimitrova). They are instantaneous in the sense that the fashion photographer tries to capture the right instant. They are interconnected because they are part of the same visual lexicon and can be seen as fragments of contemporary British fashion. They are interchangeable and interdependent in that the more pictures you look at, the better you understand the way they echo and question each other. They produce a new kind of images: ‘Une immense masse d’images qui peut se structurer par les rapports qu’elles ont entre elles, bien plus qu’avec ce qu’elles représentent’ (Lemagny in Monneyron 2010, 50).

- 4 In that sense, the manner in which some photographers decentre the model and the clothes indeed questions the very purpose of the fashion photograph, which is one of the features of contemporary British fashion photography. Going against the conventionally beautiful, artists often resort more or less explicitly to the Gothic genre in gloomy settings which seem to fictionalize the fears of their models and, more largely, of British society. Many pictures verge on the morbid, exploiting sexual allusions and the Gothic, reflexively echoing the fashion world’s preoccupation with its own objectification as in Sean Ellis’s self-reflexive and anti-fashion work. The deathly undertones of his pictures are linked to the themes chosen, but also to the very medium used (photography) and the field explored (fashion). Evans stresses the deathly nature of photography: ‘Barthes described the effects of this death-in-life characteristic of the photograph as “this vertigo of time defeated” and he equally identifies fashion as an ephemeral time-based medium’ (Evans 2009, 17). With cropped images which do not allow the viewer to know what he is presented with, it is hard to define what fashion images are really selling in Ellis’s 1997 spread for *The Face* entitled ‘Welcome to the clinic’ and subtitled ‘we’ll tear your soul apart.’ His work relies on the psychological and the spiritual, and on ‘the characteristic motifs of imprisonment, torture, and vampirism’ (Goodlad 149). As Sontag puts it, ‘the camera can be lenient; it is also expert at being cruel. But its cruelty only produces another kind of beauty [and] . . . it is not surprising that some photographers who serve fashion are also drawn to the non-photogenic’ (Sontag 104). Quite often resorting to the deathly quality of fashion pictures, fashion and photography both share ‘the generic quality of the *memento mori* by virtue of their specific relation to time’ (Evans 2009, 17).
- 5 Richard Burbidge’s passion for masks and what’s behind them led him to shoot a series for Alexander McQueen. He takes the viewer by surprise, not only because he succeeds in capturing unexpected expressions on the face of a defiant model, but mostly due to Lee McQueen’s eerie creations, making the clothes and accessories central in the pictures while at the same time questioning the aesthetic essence and the very purpose of the photographic medium. The fashion creation (McQueen’s mask) embalms the model’s face, which is in turn embalmed in the photograph ‘holding her image forever like a relic in a reliquary’ (Evans 2009, 18).
- 6 The power of physical appearance seems to return as a sign of interior identity in Alice Hawkins’s obsession with Americana, or Miles Aldridge’s lush candy-coloured images. The pictures of these two artists may look like perfect examples of the globalization/homogenization of fashion photography, and yet they reflect deeper concerns. Miles Aldridge creates singular scenes with ‘psychologically complex characters’ in surreal

settings that may at first appear very superficial. His use of colours confronts the viewer with ‘an appealing mix of overt sexuality and sweetness.’ No detail is left uncovered and ‘slightly sordid scenarios’ are turned into ‘acid-hued glamour’ (Aldridge, back cover). In a series for *Ponysteps*, Aldridge was supposed to shoot a skirt by Dolce & Gabbana, a necklace by Stephen Einhorn, along with a bra by Stockings and Romance, but the skirt and the necklace are covered in a splash of milk.

- 7 For the exhibition ‘The Condition of England’ held at the Northern Gallery of Contemporary Art in Sunderland in 2005, Alice Hawkins presented her new project ‘My England,’ a set of documentary photographs celebrating what she calls ‘the everyday burlesque’ in English culture i.e. how traditional ideas of Englishness both survive and are challenged by changes. The artist’s work related to the phrase ‘the condition of England’ coined by the Victorian moral philosopher Thomas Carlyle to map the changing moral, political and economic state of a nation ‘full of wealth, of multifarious produce, supply for human want in every kind’ and yet ‘dying of inanition’ (Carlyle 7). In this series, which is not strictly speaking a fashion series, Hawkins investigates how we construct our imaginary relationship with the idea of ‘England’—what it is, or was, or never was. ‘The sitters express their singularity of character, which extends to every detail of their personae from sartorial tastes to expression and posture’ (Federico). Her fashion work might conversely look ‘global’ because she is obsessed with a certain image of Americana—the bling and the gaudy colours, the peroxide hair à la Dolly Parton, the white teeth and false nails.

What may strike the viewer is that like all creative art forms, photographers’ work responds to, and represents an aspect of cultural history, social discourse and the cultural climate of the given moment within the frame of editorial constraints and commissioned demands. Within these restrictions, however, they have managed to create innovative work that plays with the genres of portraiture, documentation and social commentary to keep the practice of fashion photography moving forward. (Federico).

- 8 The previous decades were highly identifiable and labelled, with the ‘naturalism’ of the Swinging Sixties and Punk Seventies, followed by ‘straight-up’ photography in the Eighties in radical youth style magazines, and unglamorous angst-ridden Grunge/Britpop pictures in the Nineties. These periods seem clearly identified to the British personae. But what makes subsequent British fashion shots clearly identifiable as British? Perhaps the imprint of documentary photography on many fashion photographers’ works is striking in the way it helps to position new British fashion photography in the past and present, or simply to realize how fluctuating the British identity is in fashion photography.
- 9 As anchored as it is in the present, recent British photography is also ‘a medium of melancholic grandeur, tinged with nostalgia, which seeks to memorialize the past’ (Williams 2007, 8), though it is ‘a tendentious *aide mémoire*, and its accuracy as an encoder of style should be accepted only partially. What we see on the printed page is not necessarily what we wore at the time’ (Williams 1998, 99). Yet, documentarists and editorial photographers have always used clothes as ‘icons of expression’ (Williams 1998, 1), raising new British fashion photography to the rank of fine art entering the gallery system. Angelo Pennetta’s images have a melancholy atmosphere and a grainy texture which reach differently to the viewer than any other glossy picture found in fashion magazines. He captures the viewer’s attention and draws him into the intimate world of his subjects. His cropped shots highlight a feeling of personal engagement with each subject. In one picture of the ‘Wash your face in my sink’ series, the siphon of the sink is

visible, as if to suggest that England is going down the drain. The framing seems imperfect—an ‘imperfect beauty’ (Cotton) which makes the picture all the more real with its outdated hippie-grungy look.

- 10 In the early 80s, two newly launched style magazines, *i-D* and *The Face*, crossed the boundaries between fashion and documentary. Derek Ridgers in London clubs captured ‘a vibrant moment in British culture’ breaking the mould of documentary portraiture, producing experimental photography in street fashion styles with a sociological edge on the themes of community fashioning and the sense of empowerment linked to the process. In Elaine Constantine’s images of youth subcultures and her 1997 ‘Mosh’ series, a groundbreaking documentary-inspired fashion spread for *The Face* magazine, a crowd of young people is photographed slamdancing and drinking. A new kind of ecstatic and colourful fashion photography emerged onto a style scene which had become gloomy and somewhat stifled. ‘Full of energy and violence, “Mosh” symbolised a break with the past with the English youth ostentatiously performing Englishness or their reinvented underground version of it in opposition to a norm.’³ In the series ‘Strictly’ by Jason Evans, a Welsh photographer, Black models posed as country gents and attempted to break down visual stereotypes. Evans’s first experimented with street fashion, different fashionable styles, social backgrounds and visual identities, a mix often widely chronicled nowadays on amateur photographers’ blogs.
- 11 Photographers like Daniel Meadows in the 70s did not see themselves as fashion photographers, and yet, as Meadows toured the island for fourteen months on board a double-decker bus known as the Free Photographic Omnibus used as a home, a travelling darkroom and gallery, making portraits of the people who agreed to be photographed and giving the images away, he recorded in his way the fashion craze of the time (70s haircuts, retro clothes, etc.). Twenty years later he photographed the same models and the evolution of the clothes and the faces growing old can be observed. Accessories typical of the British paraphernalia (bowler hats, umbrellas, etc.) and elements characteristic of the British landscape (green hills, ponds and lakes, British mansions, urban settings, cloudy skies...) are often used by fashion photographers to anchor their pictures in a ‘real’ setting. Perry Ogden has a strong sense of the rural, the remote, of history and of cultural heritage, from documentary series to fashion shots, as if trying to go back to lost values, or to firmer grounds than the ones the UK is currently standing on.
- 12 Challenging the assertion of Britishness in the face of the multiplicity of its expressions in a fast-changing, globalized era, the body of work of these fashion photographers shows how fashion photography may rely on the vernacular and the documentary to fabricate the new. Mixed media are an essential part of the creative process, with the photographic medium resorting to theatricality, costuming, stage designing, music, dance—towards the moving image, with many artists turning to film to better capture movement and a sense of the moment which, they often say, photography allows them to capture only partially. The variety of media used and the nature of the photographic medium (analogue/digital) is crucial to understand the way images circulate and interpenetrate each other—a constitutive element of new British fashion photography. The various circulation formats used (magazine/art galleries/the Internet) also are of interest in understanding the changes undergone by contemporary British fashion pictures.
- 13 New British fashion photographers may resort to analogue or digital photography or an innovative mixture of the two in order to question the (in)authenticity of the moment. They thus problematize the real through images in which artifice is skilfully staged. In

Tim work, for instance, the setting becomes visionary and produces spectacular contrasts in scale (huge or small), featuring a giant spitfire, tables hanging in trees, larger-than-life spiders, swans, snails or dolls, or the real cracked head of a six-foot Humpty Dumpty, a universally known character from British folklore. The head is not digitally created, it is an actual prop, complete with yolk, cream-coloured slimy shell and sad blue eyes. In this particular example, Walker chose analogue photography because he likes the fact that there is an end point to the photo shoot as he is self-rationing his resources, like 'a loaded gun.'⁴

- 14 At the other end of the spectrum, often shooting people against blank backgrounds and resorting to multiple digital manipulations of the pictures, artists like John Rankin have contributed to making British fashion photography shift from the magazine page to the computer screen. He co-created *Dazed & Confused*, a free street magazine focusing on youth-based trends with music, art, fashion, film and literature. He has slowly built a business empire out of it, recently creating *The Hunger magazine* (2011) with daring campaigns such as 'Use Protection' which displays accessories like a strass-studded gas mask that one might find difficult to imagine any use for. Rankin also moved to fashion film long ago with RankinFilm and a whole package of communication services for business brands under the name The Full Service.
- 15 In a very different manner, the work of the LaRoache brothers, Wolfgang Mustain and Laurence Edney, two former models, is imbued with black and white Gothicism and 'strikingly Victorian theatricality,' with a 'hauntingly antique appearance,' The photographs are the result of an innovative incorporation of technology. By exploring out-dated techniques, painting with light-sensitive photographic emulsion, printing on unusual surfaces, the LaRoache Brothers question the generic conventions of photographic representation, showing that a picture is more than just the subject matter' (Clarkson). The pair set an ethereal parallel between the past and present and say that they have 'always had a penchant for dark drama in all forms of theatre, films, music, paintings etc.' away from 'the clinical, over-manipulated works' of their contemporaries like Rankin.
- 16 Since the late 1990s, the duo composed of British art director Thornton-Jones, and South-African photographer Du Preez, has regularly worked across fashion, art, advertising, film, music (Björk), and most recently dance, keeping their practice free to move from one field to the other and generating new links between artists. 'It's a mind-set that's made them a magnet for other unorthodox creat, including McQueen. In the duo's Light Installation for his 'La Dame Bleue' catwalk show—a homage to the late fashion iconoclast Isabella Blow—sabres of neon light rose and fell at the end of the runway, pulsing in time to a pounding sonic backdrop of galloping horses and ethereal wing-beats' (Baron). Their work often has a fresh sci-fi style sometimes verging on the post-human, mixing photography, drawing, collage, light filters, superimposition of images, or abstract painting techniques, acknowledging an inherent grasp of the sculptural qualities of their models or dancers in their pictures as well as in recent contemporary art projects. In the 'Chrysalis' series, as in many other shots, the model seems absorbed by the invasive background, as her white skin is softly nibbled on by deathly moths, which again gives an insight into one of the macabre trends of fashion photography, a recurrent standpoint in fashion photography these days and a theme used by fashion designers, as noticed by Caroline Evans in *Fashion at the Edge: Spectacle, Modernity and Deathliness* (2003). The graphic quality of their pictures and the mixture of various media which makes the

editorial look like Indian ink sketches is also present in Nick Knight's jagged decors, deconstructed lines and shattered silhouettes.

- 17 Knight is the founder of SHOWstudio, a website which 'has pioneered fashion film and is now recognized as the leading force behind this new medium, offering a unique platform to nurture and encourage fashion to engage with moving image in the digital age' (Knight). He believes that the moving image is the most truthful medium to capture the fashion spirit and narrative woven in the clothes by the designers. Knight is conscious of the fact that SHOWstudio offers 'branded content,' but he believes in the larger freedom granted to the fashion photographer and film maker thanks to the new media used, and constant dialogue with the most extravagant fashion designers. Far from the old billboards, social networks are also a new tool appropriated by contemporary British fashion photographers or film makers to make their pictures flow across national borders. In 2010, Nick Knight set up 'Plato's Atlantis' by Alexander McQueen. The futuristic show was live-streamed on social networks, as gigantic cameras filmed models dressed in short, reptile-patterned, belled-shaped skirts and digitally printed dresses. The colours were first green and brown, softly fading into aqua and blue and the massive shoes looked like the scaly skins of antediluvian sea monsters (an underwater period, McQueen said, we might be returning to with the melting of the ice-cap) in a world going to pieces.
- 18 Shaping our memories and the way we look at a picture, contemporary fashion images reflect their own impermanence and incredible vitality, questioning the existence of a British identity. Looking back to postwar years pictures, Norman Parkinson, in his photographs for British Vogue, created a vision of Englishness 'in which British women were seen as tailored, elegant and resolute' (Williams 2007, 107). Contemporary British fashion photography is not as clearly 'British' as before. It seems both anchored in the present and filled with nostalgia, reflecting from the heart of a mercantile civilization only drawn to pleasure. Fashion photography may be associated to an aesthetic of the ephemeral looking for meaning in a whirl of endless images. According to some fashion photographers, photography is an 'old medium,' says Knight, and Art school students are even writing dissertations on this theme.⁵ The darkness at the heart of some fashion spreads sometimes seems linked to the digitalisation process undergone by fashion pictures that induces a sense of disconnection from real time and space and that amounts to 'the disappearance of the real as photographic referent in a world that still believes that pictures tell the truth' (Evans 2009, 30). Such statements are elegiac in tone, yet countered by the vitality of the innovative artistry of fashion photography. Fashion photography in Britain may be seen as an art form coming to an end, yet which is revitalized by the use and interferences of other media, of designers of various nationalities bringing with them their own creativity, stories, and cultures.

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NOTES

1. 'Mediascapes' are defined as a network of images that are produced and spread by the media ('répertoires d'images et d'informations produites et diffusées par les journaux, les magazines, les chaînes de télévision, les films' [ASSAYAG 207]).
2. 'Ideoscapes' are linked to the circulation of images referring to representations of the world or political ideologies ('liés à la circulation d'images en référence aux représentations du monde, aux idéologies politiques . . . Soit autant de 'paysages de la postmodernité', qualifiés de 'mondes imaginés', véhiculés par ces nouveaux agents que sont les médias, . . . les technologies, [etc.]' [ASSAYAG 207]).
3. See my article in the University of Nantes E-CRINI online journal, 'The Impetuous Englishness of Elaine Constantine's Fashion Photography (90s-2000s)', following a workshop on 'Representing the British and American Nations in Contemporary Photography of Women and Women Photographers' Works' (March 2013). Constantine has recently been working on her most ambitious project to date—writing and directing her first feature film, *Northern Soul*, a celebration of the late 1960s and 1970s dance movement that saw nightclubs in the North of England rise to the sound of American soul music, a typical example of how it was reappropriated locally by the British youth.
4. To read more about the narrative as an essential component of Walker's work, see my article in the University of Nantes E-CRINI online journal, 'Tailoring the British Landscape: Tim Walker's Stage Designed Fashion Photographs' 7 (November 2014).
5. See Sally Bolton's research work, *The Death of the Fashion Image*, under the supervision of Caroline Evans at the University of the Arts London.

ABSTRACTS

The theoretical framework around British fashion photography has often considered it as a mercantile (Hall-Duncan) and social issue rather than an artistic one (Val Williams). Not only considering fashion photography as a visual archiving of British style in a cultural continuum woven through British art, music, films and design, this paper will observe how contemporary fashion photographers, editors, stylists and set designers chronicle the spirit of the times, but also offer to the viewer the product of their combined imaginations mediated by the fashion industry. Challenging the assertion of Britishness in the face of the multiplicity of its expressions in a fast-changing, globalized era, fashion photography may resort to the vernacular and the documentary to fabricate the new. Shaping our memories and the way we look at a picture, contemporary fashion images reflect their own impermanence and incredible vitality, questioning the British identity and the very notion of globalization.

Dans le cadre théorique selon lequel la photographie de mode britannique est souvent analysée, elle est réduite à sa dimension mercantile (Hall-Duncan), et considérée sous un angle social plutôt qu'artistique (Val Williams). En considérant comment la photographie de mode constitue une archive visuelle du style britannique dans un continuum culturel tissé à travers l'art, la musique, les films ou le design, cet article observera comment les photographes de mode contemporains, les éditeurs, stylistes et designers de décors enregistrent l'esprit de leur temps, tout en offrant au regard le produit d'imaginaires combinées, par le truchement de l'industrie de la mode. En défiant l'affirmation de la britannicité face à la multiplicité de ses expressions dans une ère globalisée, la photographie de mode s'appuie sur le vernaculaire et le documentaire pour fabriquer du neuf. En modelant nos mémoires et la façon dont nous regardons les images, la photographie de mode contemporaine reflète sa propre impermanence et son incroyable vitalité, tout en interrogeant la notion d'identité britannique et de globalisation.

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Mots-clés: photographie de mode contemporaine, histoire de la mode, identité, britannicité, mondialisation

Keywords: contemporary fashion photography, fashion history, identity, Britishness, globalization

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Julie Morère is an associate professor of English at the University of Nantes and a member of the CRINI team (Centre de Recherche sur les Identités Nationales et l'Interculturalité). Her field of interest has extended to the image and interdisciplinary visual criticism. She is currently working on contemporary British photography, focusing on the fashion world. She is interested

in the way the images created by fashion photographers rely on and reinvent traditional elements of the British culture and identity to express their own aesthetic concerns.