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# Beyond the in-between: Rei Kawakubo at The Met and the clash between eastern and western concepts in fashion studies

## **ABSTRACT**

*The 2017 exhibition Rei Kawakubo/Comme des Garçons – Art of the In-Between at the Metropolitan Museum in New York exposed the rich work of the iconic Japanese fashion designer Rei Kawakubo to a larger western audience. As the title of the exhibition indicates, Kawakubo's work does not fit well within some of the classic conceptual assumptions around fashion, but can be placed as something 'in-between'. The show and printed museum guide were arranged around a series of conceptual dichotomies that Kawakubo's work transgressed. Yet these transgressions also exposed the arbitrariness of central distinctions in fashion and questioned how universal key concepts in fashion really are. In examining the printed guide to the Kawakubo show, this text challenges the intercultural applicability of concepts such as 'fetish' and 'copy' across cultural spheres in fashion studies, and questions the universal application of such concepts to unpack meanings and practices in fashion.*

## **KEYWORDS**

fashion concepts  
cultural perspectives  
fashion theory  
fetish  
copy  
Buddhism  
Rei Kawakubo

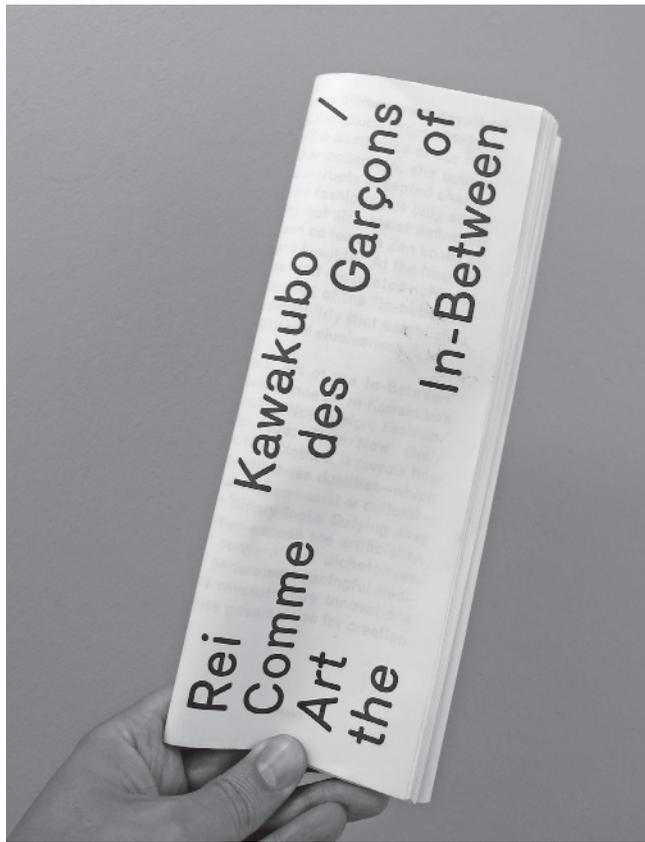


Figure 1: Guide to 'Rei Kawakubo/Comme des Garçons: Art of the In-Between' at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo by the author.

## INTRODUCTION

The exhibition *Rei Kawakubo/Comme des Garçons – Art of the In-Between* opened at the Metropolitan Museum in New York in May 2017, and was yet another pearl in a great line of exhibitions at the Costume Institute. As the exhibition guide to The Met highlights, the work of Kawakubo

[...] upends conventional notions of beauty and disrupts accepted characteristics of the fashionable body. Her fashions not only stand apart from the genealogy of clothing but also resist definition and confound interpretation. They can be read as Zen koans or riddles devised to baffle, bemuse, and bewilder.

(2017: 2)

The guide, however, never reveals what 'accepted characteristics of the fashionable body' really are. Instead, as the description of the exhibition unfolds, the curator Andrew Bolton's interpretation of Kawakubo's work explicitly places the focus on the transgressions of dichotomies that we could assume are the unmentioned 'accepted characteristics'. Indeed, the guide argues that

Kawakubo's work opens new dimensions on some of the core concepts of fashion:

'Rei Kawakubo/Comme des Garçons: Art of the In-Between' examines nine expressions of 'in-betweenness' in Kawakubo's collections: Absence/Presence; Design/Not Design; Fashion/Antifashion; Model/Multiple; High/Low; Then/Now; Self/Other; Object/Subject; and Clothes/Not Clothes. It reveals how her designs occupy the spaces between these dualities – which have come to be seen as natural rather than social or cultural – and how they resolve and dissolve binary logic. Defying easy classification themselves, her clothes expose the artificiality, arbitrariness, and 'emptiness' of conventional dichotomies.

(The Met 2017: 1)

As The Met website suggests about the exhibit, 'Kawakubo breaks down the imaginary walls between these dualisms, exposing their artificiality and arbitrariness' (The Met Web 2017). The observations above, on Kawakubo's 'in-betweenness', offer a great opportunity to also examine the 'emptiness' of conventional dichotomies hinted at in the exhibition guide. By directly turning the reader's awareness to Zen koans or riddles, and Japanese spiritually infused concepts, the guide emphasizes eastern religious references that clash with western religiously infused dichotomies. Indeed, if The Met exhibition is aimed at an American audience, these eastern connotations 'resist definition' as they transgress western dualisms and 'imaginary walls'.

Assumptions about cultural essences divided between East and West, emerging from both geographic locations and mental and spiritual frameworks, have been part of both colonial and postcolonial nationalism, where myths about cultural delineations have been part of building coherence within imagined communities (Anderson 1983). As Chatterjee (1993) posits, the East is not only 'non-western', but a specific organization of concepts used both by colonial and by postcolonial nationalists to mobilize contrasts towards the West. Along similar lines, as argued by Egyptologist Jan Assmann (2009), dualisms, strict definitions and distinctions lie at the roots of the Abrahamic religions. To Assman, the Abrahamic root (Old Testament) allows no room for hybrids or 'in-betweenness' as it stringently delineates between the authentic One God and the false idols, what Assmann calls 'The Mosaic Distinction'. While Assman's genealogical grounding of the distinction can be discussed, it highlights monotheism's impact on western thinking as preferring uncompromising distinctions when it comes to faith cultures, rather than inclusion and plenitude of spiritual practices. The Mosaic distinction is thus a demarcation with grave or even deadly implications. However, as we will see, in eastern domains the distinction between God and idols does not come with the same moral weight, and may thus allow us to 'expose the artificiality, arbitrariness, and "emptiness" of conventional dichotomies' as the exhibition guide suggests.

It is, however, important to notice that the argument brought up in this text is not an accusation of cultural insensitivity or appropriation amongst the authors of The Met guide, but aims to expose some western dispositions in concepts and everyday understandings of fashion, and points towards theoretical vistas of fashion studies beyond the empty signifier of 'in-between'. The Met guide seems to have thus been taken straight from the warning that Jones and Leshkovich suggest: that the success of Asian fashion may *reorient* global fashion towards a wider range of cultural expressions, but

simultaneously *re-Orientalize* Asia and Asians as the exotic and cryptic other, outside of western logics, and pushed out to be 'the Orient' (2003: 6–8).

Yet, The Met's dilemma must be acknowledged, that is, how to open Kawakubo's world of references to a western audience, a world which in many ways departs from a radically different point than that of the audience visiting The Met. Appealing to an arbitrary distinction between East and West, as between premodern and modern, may be obscuring as much as it is revealing (cf. Latour 1993). Neither East nor West are coherent entities, but full of inner differences, conflicts and hybridity. It must also be noted that western scholars have historicized eastern spirituality, and the voice of eastern religious scholars has often been addressing the West (or its colonizers more specifically). Thus, the general understanding of eastern religious thought has often been aligned with western religious frameworks (Fitzgerald 2000). Following these developments, this article is also mainly referencing western scholars or writers addressing a western audience. But in order to highlight how The Met guide plays with 'in-betweenness' to 'resist definition' I aim to show how the guide's rationale in describing Kawakubo's work is steeped in a *specific* Abrahamic tradition of thought, with its emphasis on dualist distinction, taking western concepts for granted as universalizing instruments for analysis and the cultural blindness that comes with them. It may seem slightly absurd that almost four decades after the Japanese 'wave' of popular designers in the early 1980s came to Paris, western museums still need to re-orient its audience towards the East, while simultaneously falling into the trap of re-orientalizing the East as something 'in-between'. This is a tricky tightrope to walk, to expose some cultural assumptions and predispositions within the conceptual apparatus common in the field of fashion studies, while avoiding reifying them. But as scholars, we must ask ourselves how fashion studies as an academic practice can become more aware of the western 'imaginary walls' that our concepts and perspectives are built upon.

The study is organized as follows: the first section introduces some basic points of the clash between eastern and western understandings of concepts commonly used in fashion and some Japanese concepts now more common in fashion vocabulary, spearheaded by the works of Kawakubo's generation of Japanese designers. After that, two notions, that of the *fetish* and *copy*, are used as lenses to show how the Abrahamic distinctions (or 'conventional dichotomies' that The Met guide calls them) have tainted these two central concepts in a way that is not directly applicable in eastern thinking. Finally, the last section discusses a possible move towards examining concepts commonly used in the study of fashion that may help open new conceptual sensibilities and more globally inclusive studies of dress.

### **IN-BETWEENNESS: FASHION BEYOND DICHOTOMIES**

The Met guide argues that Kawakubo's fashions 'resist definition and confound interpretation'; thus, an initial question would be what definitions and interpretations are resisted and confounded. Yet, such denotations are not explained in the guide, but a reader can suppose that it relates to some of the basic assumptions or perspectives of western culture and its genealogy of clothing. It signals a conceptual mismatch on a very foundational level between the cultures of thinking, and remains a challenge for unpacking and theorizing fashion, as also highlighted by Niessen (2003).

I would suggest that parallels could be drawn to the transgressions of distinction highlighted in *The Path* (Puett and Gross-Loh 2016), a bestselling

book built on Michael Puett's fabled course at Harvard: 'Classical Chinese Ethical and Political Theory'. The authors offer an insight into how even very basic assumptions about life, and being in general, contrast considerably between classic thinking in East and West. Puett presents a basic premise that instead of a western emphasis of the good life where the subject is supposed to 'find oneself' and build a life around this 'true self' (either through a vocation from above, or from an inner or deeper 'self'), Chinese philosophers such as Confucius, Mencius and Laozi instead suggest that we are fragmented, confused and changeable. In this condition, subjects are unable to find a coherent path in life, and so they will lead better lives if they accept and work with these often confusing conditions. *The Path*, from Puett and Gross-Loh's perspective, is about abandoning a search for fixed points, a 'true self' or even 'identity', to instead focus our attention on our most everyday processes, interactions and relationships, with the smallest rituals and behaviours. In a fragmented, contradictory and quickly changing world, which Puett and Gross-Loh argue are conditions of late-modern times, this ancient Chinese approach may help us find a more wholesome path in life. Whereas their argument somewhat has the tone of a self-help-manual-in-uncertain-times, it highlights a western fixation of finding the 'true self', especially today, after the death of God and the eternal soul.

Applied to the study of fashion, their argument points towards how the concept of 'self' at the foundation of 'identity' stands on shaky ground from an eastern perspective, but for very different reasons than postmodern simulations and masquerades as suggested for example by Efrat Tseëlon (1995, 1997). Instead of a signifying language, communicating or masking a layered 'self' (even if this self is performed or shaped through interaction), the focus on fashion should perhaps not be on signification at all. Instead, as part of a process or a path, its frame of reference could be towards a spiritual trajectory, or a vehicle, which can help a person act and grow through micro-activities with no clear communicative aim. Following Confucius, Puett and Gross-Loh argue that the 'self' is fully malleable and unstable,

Instead of thinking of ourselves as single, unified selves who we are trying to discover through self-reflection, we could think of ourselves as complex arrays of emotions, dispositions, desires, and traits that often pull us in different and contradictory ways.

(2016: 43)

While this perspective may resonate with the last decade's 'affective turn' in social theory (Clough 2007), from an eastern viewpoint, this recent turn may seem much like old news. Indeed, if we would extrapolate Puett and Gross-Loh's argument, the everyday concept of 'identity' may be a straw man as it draws our attention towards ideas of inherent essences, even if these are performed, embodied and socially reproduced as in an interactionist approach (cf. Kaiser 1997; Tseëlon 1992), rather than the non-essential micro-rituals that constitute the everyday of Confucius and Mencius. As argued by cultural theorist Byung-Chul Han, the very concept of a path (*dao*) places emphasis on process rather than being; it is not going 'deeper' but meanders horizontally across life, not seeking *truth* or *meaning*, but *balance* (2017).

With the Buddhist idea of non-self, that the coherent self is but an illusion that we make ourselves, centring desire and craving around what is or ought to be 'me' or 'mine', the mind is left untied. Extending a common metaphor in Buddhist thought is the mind being like an inquisitive monkey trapped in an

empty house, with each of the senses represented by a window. The monkey is trapped in the house, confined within his senses, and yet utterly mesmerized by this prison.

If one is fascinated, the sense of claustrophobia becomes more and more vivid, more and more acute, because one begins to explore one's imprisonment. In fact fascination is part of the reason he remains imprisoned. He is captured by his fascination.

(Trungpa 1987: 129)

Identity in dress may be a similar monkey prison: we are so fascinated by the imprisonment of our dressed sensibility (as a house of our self) that we fail to recognize the house is empty. Indeed, emptiness is a recurrent theme in Kawakubo's references in dress, and also suggested by The Met guide:

At the heart of her work are the koan *mu* (emptiness) and the related notion of *ma* (space), which coexist in the concept of the 'in-between'. This reveals itself as an aesthetic sensibility that establishes an unsettling zone of visual ambiguity and elusiveness.

(The Met 2017: 2)

Since the popular wave of Japanese designers in the 1980s, many fashion designers have embraced eastern, especially Japanese, concepts to describe uncommon takes on design methods and values that also represent perspectives on the world that depart from such stances of what western dichotomies would pin down as 'in-between': emptiness, fragmentation and imperfection. The popularity of *wabi-sabi* to describe the approach of a style of Japanese fashion design has helped expose special approaches to design practice, different from the West (Koda 1985; Koren 1984). *Wabi-sabi* is the acceptance of imperfection and the transience and finitude of objects, and a famous example in fashion used by designers such as Issey Miyake, Yohji Yamamoto and Rei Kawakubo (English 2011: 131). This type of imperfection by design came to the broader attention of western fashion audiences not least through an iconic black sweater pierced with holes by Kawakubo in 1982. Kawakubo dubbed it her 'lace' sweater and it exposed the aesthetic similarities, and yet radically different cultural connotations, with western lace. The imperfection of eastern purposeful 'failure' stood in bright contrast to the exquisite western traditions of lace. Kawakubo's result is a form of torn knitwear with a look that 'contest [s] and expand [s] the accepted limits of beauty' (The Met 2017: 14). *Wabi-sabi* is a concept derived from Buddhist teaching and specifically the three marks of life, suffering, impermanence and emptiness, with implications on design as roughness, imperfection and an embrace of ephemerality, modesty, decay and deconstruction (Juniper 2003). *Wabi-sabi* has become a popular example of a break with western values, and especially the exquisite finish that comes with the ideal of perfection (Van Godtsenhoven et al. 2016: 135f).

Another example is the recent trend of Japanese techniques of textile repair, such as the delicate *Sashiko* stitches ('little stabs') and the patchwork *Boro* fabrics (Sadako Takeda and Roberts 2001). These ideas have not least been connecting to 'slow' ideas of consumerism and fashion (Gwilt and Rissanen 2011; Wellesley-Smith 2015). Also *Kintsugi* ('golden joinery'), the technique of highlighting repairs with gold or golden threads, has been developed into an explicit technique to address the fashion economy by Dutch

fashion designers Saskia van Drimmelen and Margreet Sweerts (2016). Van Drimmelen and Sweerts have used the technique in collections but especially in repair workshops, where participants turn damages, such as rips and tears in fabric, into golden-threaded embellishments, and lately the designers have expanded this golden repair approach into a table top game to highlight and explore the intertwined processes of garment and social repair.

As seen in the above examples, an assumed contrast between western and eastern concepts emerges in the demarcation between the truthful, holy and perfect on the one hand and the profane, imperfect and repaired on the other, and yet these distinctions are not demarcated along the same lines from an eastern perspective. Imperfection in the form of abrasion is not faulty but an exposure to the impermanence and suffering that saturate reality. As Han (2017) suggests, so many western perspectives with spiritual connotations stem from the Greek idea of the *adyton*, the restricted and windowless area at the heart of the temple, inaccessible to the public. Contrasted to this, in eastern thinking, nothing is inaccessible, isolated or absolute, or cut loose from the fundamental reality of change. The temple is transparent, mainly consisting of doors and windows. To the audience of The Met guide, ambiguity may be 'unsettling', but from an eastern perspective this is the fluid element of reality itself. The western focus on dualities, highlighted by The Met guide, becomes especially apparent in another common analytical concept of fashion: the idea of fetishism.

## **BEYOND THE FETISHIZATION OF THE FETISH**

Kawakubo has created several collections with references to the fetish scene, not least the *Lilith Collection* of Autumn/Winter 1992–93, *Dark Romance* Autumn/Winter 2004–05 and the *18th-Century Punk* Autumn/Winter 2016–17 (The Met 2017: 18). Indeed, the names call upon the darker and esoteric elements of seduction, inversion and rebellion. Kawakubo has, over the last few years, also developed two collaborations with so-called 'post-fetish' brand Zana Bayne, in both cases collections of leather harnesses with gunmetal hardware, referencing BDSM or fetish wear, and sold in limited editions at the *Comme des Garçons* Black stores, and one exclusively at the *Comme des Garçons* Black Market concept shop in Tokyo.

The fetish is a commonly used reference in the study of fashion (Entwistle 2015) as it refers to an object 'that is believed to possess, or grant, the owner or holder of the object access to divine or other powers' (Barnard 2014: 199). The word derives from the Portuguese *feiticio*, meaning fated, charmed, bewitched and 'entered the English language with reference to primitive belief in magic' (Kunzle 2007: 564). With their furs and feathers, the magic objects are believed to transfer or grant access to the powers of those animals. The fetish also refers to illegal or heretical talismans or idols of the Middle Ages (Pietz 1985: 6), and as Pietz also posits, it was the colonizing missionary Catholics who projected models of idolatry and superstition onto the objects that they encountered in Africa, not the original producers of the fetishes. The concept thus became colonially loaded, ridiculing ancestry cults, animist and 'savage' religions as 'primitive', concerned more with magic than with true organized religion of the 'civilized' West. But as Pietz points out, it is the westerner who fetishizes the fetish and westerners continue to be spellbound by their own colonial categorization. As Pietz (1985) suggests, it is the westerners who believe in fetishes, not the original producers, as the very idea of slicing reality along such lines is alien to them.

Both Marx and Freud point to the 'false' or 'inauthentic' use of the magic qualities of the fetish, and these ideas of idolatry echo throughout modern western thought (Gamman and Makinen 1994). For Marx, the commodity becomes ensnared in 'metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties' (1976: 163) that are not only the pragmatic use of things, but in a realm of cultural beliefs and superstition or 'fantastic form' (1976: 165). The fetish is a magical object also to Freud, a 'deviation in respect of the sexual aim' and a substitute for desire, a false copy or replacement (Freud 1953: 149f) that becomes a psychological 'aberration'. The Marxist and Freudian ideas of a fraud or displacement echo throughout fashion theories, not least in the work of Flugel's discussions on shifting erogenous zones (1950), König's sexual exhibitionism (1973) or Laver's seduction principle (1969), and like the Marxist fetish, they put the fetish as a form of substitute: the replacement for a 'truer' value, or the appearance (or lack) of the phallus or something hidden and more truthful. Also in Steele's groundbreaking study of fetishism (1996), even as it explicitly avoids describing the fetish as a pathological object of desire, the Freudian heritage of analysis still echoes throughout. Steele makes great efforts to escape the psychologized notions of the fetish and she posits how the recurring trends with connotations of fetishism in fashion signal the disappearance between the 'normal' and the 'perverse' (1996: 197), and yet the overall rhetoric is still profoundly anchored in Freudian references and terminology, placing the fetish beyond the control of the subject, to instead appear in the media, system or in diagnosis.

Rather than ascribing Kawakubo's work on the fetish as 'in-between', is it possible to move to a conceptual model of thought beyond fashion's fetishization of the fetish? If fashion needs magical re-enchantment, as Wilson (2004) suggests, could we move laterally away from the 'unreality' and 'illusion' of fetish, and yet still use religious metaphors to describe the seemingly magical aspects of fashion?

The concept of 'magic' is broad, but there are also eastern forms of magic, often in connection with the traditions of tantra. For example, Vajrayana Buddhism is a form of tantric or esoteric Buddhism, sharing some similarities with Zen (Laumakis 2008). Following its foremost proponent in the West, the Tibetan teacher in the United States Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche (1939–87), Vajrayana emphasizes some different traits in Buddhism and the understanding of reality and its use in the path to end suffering. In Vajrayana,

[...] difficulties with relative reality stem from our attitudes and beliefs, rather than from relativity itself. We are called to see each arising of our day not as a threat, but as an opportunity – a chance to open our arms, lay down our weapons, and surrender to this exact moment of our life.

(Ray 2010)

In Kitagawa's description of the tantric forms of Buddhism, the use of sexual symbolism is highly present throughout the traditions, which in turn resonates with the eroticized connotations of the fetish. For example, the tantric Sahajyanas,

[...] referred to the object of their religious experience [as] 'the whore', both as a reference to the sexual symbolism of ritual Tantra and as a challenge to monastic conceptions of spiritual purity, but also as a metaphor for the universal accessibility of enlightenment.

(2002: 80)

Behind misogynic connotations of the English 'whore' lies a metaphysic of 'the nondual experience that transcends both emptiness and pure mind' (Kitagawa 2002: 81). From the viewpoint of Vajrayana, truth is found in the relative and in everyday life, rather than in higher realms, the soul or somewhere else.

Relative truth – our lives experienced nakedly, with no overlay – always arrives as a fissure in the fabric of our conceptual world. It feels risky because it's pointing to an area that is unknown to our egos; and the invitation to the Vajrayana practitioner is to step through that fissure – to go toward it, to trust it, and to open to it.

(Ray 2010)

The task here is to practice a path of inclusion rather than exclusion, to 'tap into the power you inherently possess to surrender utterly to your unique life, which is the only gateway in the entire universe through which you can enter eternity' (Ray 2010). In its dissolution of dualities, a world opens 'beyond thought and imagination', which is the *vajradhatu*, meaning the 'realm of indestructibility' (Ray 2001: 1). Vajrayana has a special take on practice leading there as it is

[...] not a freedom *from* our relative lives, but freedom *for* our lives *exactly as they are*. In Sanskrit this is called *mahasukha*, or great bliss, which indicates the utter and unique sense of joy that is possible when nothing in our experience is pushed aside or cast out.

(Ray 2010, original emphasis)

Only through full engagement with love, or more specifically *lust*, can deeper knowledge of reality be known.

Lust means love that is voracious, uncontrollable, and reckless; we're not talking about sexual lust here – it's a much vaster and more inclusive than that. [...] It's not like 'Who am I gonna love? Who am I gonna hate?' – which is weak. When we realize that our basic nature is to love everything, it's incredibly liberating.

(Ray 2010)

From this perspective, fashion, even in the form of some relative reality, and loaded with sexual references, is a path to deeper understanding of the human condition and a vehicle for enlightenment, rather than an illusion to be overcome or 'seen through' (like the fetish in a western sense). Sexuality, desire and bliss can help end the bifurcation between self and other, or subjects and object, and thus desire is not 'dangerous', leading the subject astray, but can be a pathway towards mind and beyond, that is, towards a *dissipation of mind*. Even in its most frivolous form, in Vajrayana fashion can be a tool for spiritual practice, and not an obstacle. For Vajrayana, the path should not be mastered or overcome, but surrendered to: if we are armored we fail to transform (Trungpa 1987: 42).

For this type of tantrism, a central component to understanding reality is the *utilization* of 'poisons' in order to reach higher states of being and ultimately nirvana. Perhaps an impactful example of this approach can be the Aghori, a tantric Hindu sect in India. The Aghori aim to overcome distinctions

and taboo as a specific goal in order achieve non-duality and enter a continuous state of cyclical time.

By systematically combining opposites the Aghori recaptures a primordial and static condition of non-duality, and identifies himself with Lord Shiva, who transcends time.

(Bloch and Parry 1982: 14)

The Aghori achieves this by *embracing* taboo, in the most extreme form in drinking from skulls, digesting urine and stool, or eating flesh from human corpses taken from the pyres (taboos of course also exist in India). 'By wallowing in decay and death the Aghori histrionically proclaims his victory over them' (Bloch and Parry 1982: 27). Not only is this a question of dissolving duality between the pure and the impure, but to erase distinction through affirmative breaking of taboo to manifest the irrelevance of boundaries (1982: 32) and to embrace both desire and disgust is to move beyond cultural constraints and embrace and fully enter the cycles of time in what becomes timelessness (Bloch and Parry 1982: 14).

The Aghori ascetics whose practices demonstrate that they can with impunity reverse what remains essential for those who are still bound to the mundane world and are still carnal beings. Having reached beyond carnality, they bombastically declare themselves impervious to the most polluting substances and actions.

(Bloch and Parry 1982: 37)

As suggested above, the tantrism of Vajrayana and the Aghori, even if they are very different in practice, refuses to see any fetish element in reality that needs to be mastered and overcome. If there are illusions or 'poisons', these are tools that can cut through dualities; they are not hinders that need to be overcome. In this radical form of the Aghori, even if fashion would socially be considered a poison, illusion or impurity, it is an essential tool to break apart distinctions. By foregrounding taboo it allows for transgression in order to dissolve illusions of mind. The fetish elements in Kawakubo's work may thus not reference fetishes in a western sense, but are tools to *break apart the distinction* of the fetish itself, to move the issue to not be tangent to the nature of truth or reality but towards karma and suffering. Like with the original missionaries rejecting the 'fetishes' of the populations they encountered, it is the westerners who believe in fetishes. In a similar vein, in the following section we can see how the distinctions between original and copy are in the eyes of the western observers or their fantasies of the Orient.

## COPIES

As mentioned in the beginning, the distinction of original and copy resonates historically with the Abrahamic preoccupation with the authenticity of a One True God versus false idols, a distinction that is a pillar of western thought (Assmann 2009). But, as suggested by Han (2017), an eastern nothingness does not necessarily entail a western sense of nihilism, and instead of a divine originality (an original act of Creation, Being or a Big Bang) the focus is on the processes that lend shape to continuous transformation.

Also fashion, in its western incarnation, bears traces of the religious distinction between originality and false idols, not least in the demarcation between modern and un-modern, or 'in' and 'out'. The real fashion is original and pure, essentially different from the counterfeits and knock-offs that are soiled by their inauthenticity. The original is exclusive and a luxury, while the copy is profane and poor, not only in price but in its spiritual and cultural value, a distinction also supported by legal definitions that are today debated primarily in western courts and fashion law. There is thus little irony in how French designer Christian Louboutin, with his famous shoes appearing in endless chains of copies, has trademarked a hue of red called 'Chinese Red' as the colour of his exclusive soles.

Bourdieu's definition of fashion highlights the temporality in the original/copy distinction as newness and demarcation are compressed into one: 'Fashion is the latest fashion, the latest difference' (1993: 135). As Troy argues (2003: 25f), the early brands of Worth and Poiret were created for the couture designers to better regulate and control the dissemination of originals and 'genuine' copies. This 'latest difference' makes the copy in fashion not only tainted by controversies of cultural appropriation of values and symbols, which has a long tradition in western couture and lifestyle production (cf. Troy 2002), but as noted in the quote above, for Bourdieu fashion is per definition also what we could call a form of *temporal appropriation*, that is, it continually references, poaches and claims earlier expressions or 'originals'. Thus, as also noted by Lipovetsky (1994) the distinction of fashion is continuously undermined by its own success; the reproduction of the newest difference deflates its distinctiveness as new and different. The prestige of difference through 'newness' is something that The Met guide points towards as a key to unlocking Kawakubo's work. Under the 'Model/Multiple' section of the show, the guide posits:

Beyond her pursuit of 'newness', Kawakubo exhibits several other preoccupations of avantgarde modernism. Perhaps the most notable is the tension between originality and reproduction, which is explored in Model/Multiple through the collection Abstract Excellence. [...]. Through the conceits of seriality and repetition, the designer created the illusion of uniformity and standardization. [...]. A meditation on variations of a single form, the collection represents a powerful statement on the unstable connection between unique artwork and mass-produced commodity.

(The Met 2017: 6)

As posited above, The Met guide asks the reader to see how Kawakubo addresses a specific perspective on fashion and the relationship between original and copy, the new and unique versus the copied and mass-produced. The *Japonisme* represented by Kawakubo's reception in the West since the 1980s has matched well with postmodernist ideas of the collapse of symbolic hierarchies, and yet Kawakubo's designs also represent, as Skov argues, a 'difference *without a difference*' (1996: 131, original emphasis). This in turn may resonate with Baudrillard's (1981) point that the distinction of original and copy is all the more hard to sustain in times dominated by easily imitative visual culture, and yet it remains one of the primary questions in the domain of fashion, in everything from the relation between fast fashion and haute couture. But it also appears in the political economies of production, between designers, brands and producers overseas. Similarly, it is gaining traction as a

field of Intellectual Property (IP) rights and the implementation of legislation to fashion.

Steeped in western thought (even in its secular form), the distinction also has overtly moral tones as it distinguishes between the genuine and authentic purity, which is celebrated within fashion, and the illegitimate connotations of the bastard copy. The copy is not only impure, but like blasphemy or an usurping heir, threatens the lineage of ancestry, heritage and what is considered legitimate, distinctions that have deep implications in legal domains, faith and state power. This in turn reverberates with the distinction between the authorized original and illegitimate copy as in true or false prophets or heirs, or the divine hierarchies, which in turn resonate with Plato's loathing of *mimesis*, the 'imitation', 'representation', 'reproduction' or 'copy', which also in neo-platonic ideas became connected to the *Demiurge*, the malevolent artisan god in Plato's *Timaeus*, producing a false world of cunning deceit (Herzog 2006).

This perspective is inherited in the historical discussions of 'authenticity' where every layer of replication comes with diminishing value not only because of the impurity of its form and matter but also a distance from higher and more true forms (cf. Auerbach 1953; Schwartz 1996). In the West, copying is circumscribed by laws, restrictions and general attitudes that inscribe it with vice. Society is highly regulated by copyright and IP laws, not least arranged by material and software restrictions regulating the highly contested act of copying. As ideas cannot be owned but are easily copied since they are intangible, they cause problems around ownership. However, legal institutions have found that the original expression of an idea can be owned when it is tangible, material, fixed. The word 'copyright' in itself signifies some of this focus on what is an original and a copy, and the legitimization of who has the formal right to make such a distinction and own the rights to the outcomes, what we commonly know as IP. As also Svendsen posits (2006: 123), copies in fashion may not only undermine the revenue of the producer but also the symbolic and monetary investment of the consumer as 'the owner of an "original" suffers a financial loss imposed by the wearer of a copy'.

Yet, it is widely acknowledged that culture is by itself an act of imitation and copying (Tarde 1899, 1903), and we learn through the act of repeating information. Similarly, academic life is indeed an endless act of quoting, training lineages, appending references and building traditions of copied citations: all highly regulated and controlled practices where breaches of customs are punished. Moreover these traditions in turn theorize cultures in ways that keep reproducing the original standpoint as the point of departure, which in many cases is at its foundation a western and colonial outlook. Thus from a perspective of power, the copy is an ambiguous concept, not least in the form of appropriation, that is, seizing something from others and claiming it as one's own. But not only in this sense does the copy bring ominous connotations: its inauthenticity is threatening contracts and economic interests, and on a more fundamental level, also legitimacy and control. As noted by postcolonial thinkers such as Fanon (1967) and Bhabha (2004), a colonial subject mimics and copies the behaviour, life and desires of the colonizer in order to become a legitimate and recognized subject, but the colonizer always fears what is camouflaged behind the 'mask' of the copy (also literally, that refusal to submission is hidden behind the veil). The risk is always that the subject's submission is not real, but any time ready to strike back at the colonial power.

Mimicry reveals something in so far as it is distinct from what might be called an itself that is behind. The effect is camouflage [...] It is not a question of harmonizing with the background, but against a mottled background, of becoming mottled [...] exactly like the technique of camouflage practiced in human warfare.

(Bhabha 2004: 121)

As exemplified in, for example, Marcus Boon's *In Praise of Copying* (2010), a Buddhist perspective of copying would set the distinction between original and copy as a false one. As Boon suggests, 'in the age of globalized capital, the commodity itself has adapted to the structures of Platonic legal ontology' (2010: 21f). In response to this, Boon sets out to examine the status of the copy as an elemental part of reality,

copying is a fundamental part of being human, that we can and should celebrate this aspect of ourselves, in full awareness of our situation. Copying is not just something human – it is a part of how the universe functions and manifests.

(Boon 2010: 7)

Perhaps this Buddhist aspect of copies comes to its front on the issue of human cloning, a much-debated topic that has mobilized considerable resistance, especially from Christian groups, but where Dr Woo Suk Hwang, a controversial Korean cloning researcher argues, 'I am Buddhist, and I have no philosophical problem with cloning. And as you know, the basis of Buddhism is that life is recycled through reincarnation' (Hwang cited in Dreifus 2004). Parallel to this argument, Boon posits that with a non-western perspective, the proliferation of copying may help reveal not only the multiplication of objects or products under a new light but also some foundational categories common in western thought. An affirmation of copying helps us

[...] rethink basic philosophical terms such as 'subject', 'object', 'the same', 'different', and 'the other' – all of which, depending on the particular ways they've been presented, have historically supported particular cultures of copying.

(Boon 2010: 7)

In one of Boon's examples, he addresses Japanese visual artist Takashi Murakami and his collaborations with Louis Vuitton to make multicolour monogram handbags, sold outside Brooklyn Museum as part of Murakami's exhibition there, and yet in a setting that would make the expensive originals appear as the copies on Canal Street. As Boon notices, this play with the distinction between original and copy was part of the marketing ploy created by Louis Vuitton, which, Boon notices, in turn echoes the endless debates on the 'authenticity' of street art (Boon 2010: 15f). As Boon hints, if it may seem that the distinction between original and copy is dissolving in this economy, it may be simply because it actually never really existed in the first place.

In correspondence with the mimetic desire theory of Girard, it is the accumulative desire for certain objects that triggers an arms race in competitive desire, but as Boon highlights, the sacrificial element in Girard's theory is today applied to the copy, rather than the whole economy of originals and copies (2010: 46f). Similarly, as Boon suggests, even the staunchest pro-copy

left persons still reject fraudulent copies that do not contain the right content, such as a placebo medicine (Boon 2010: 108). Also, from a Buddhist perspective, Boon suggests that Karma is tied to being a form of copy, as a chain of consequence:

In many Buddhist traditions, the word for action would be 'karma', meaning not merely what happens to you or what you do, but the aggregated set of causes, effects, actions, and consequences that produce phenomenal reality as it appears to us and as we experience it.

(2010: 137)

Here, original and copy are inseparable, less a 'chain' of events but more like knots on the thread of time. Rather than think that one can isolate the original action or cause from the replication and effects, one should focus on the non-duality between cause and effect to 'see through the dense network of deception (samsara) that the self ultimately creates through ignorance about how things are' (Boon 2010: 136). This leads Boon to suggest,

No 'copy' labeled as such can ever 'be' nondual, but it can be the mark of our yearning for, and part of a practice that leads to a recognition of, 'it'. Struggling with words, ideas, concepts, copying can only be a misrecognition – yet it is one that brings us closer to a realization of *sunmyata* ['essencelessness' or 'emptiness'], if we pay attention closely enough.

(2010: 237)

A Buddhist perspective on originals and copies dissolves the moral and legal connotations of the distinction to move beyond legitimacy of reproduction to instead embrace mimetics as a foundation of both our physical and spiritual nature. It shifts our focus away from the purity and higher ideal form of the source in Plato or the Abrahamic religions to the entanglements of suffering in mimetic processes themselves, the knots on the thread of life. The original and copy distinction is thus not necessarily entangled in divine or moral issues, or the questions of authenticity and legitimacy, as much as in karma and suffering, which are very different loci of human existence and life. This shift also highlights a more overarching adjustment of attention, from the 'system' of fashion and its focus on chronological time ('the latest difference' as Bourdieu would have it) towards the experiences of the dressed body and its Being in the karmic cycles of impermanence, yet continuous suffering.

## **CONCLUSION: EASTERN AND WESTERN APPROACHES TO FASHION**

To Buddhist and environmental scholar and activist Stephanie Kaza, a Buddhist critique of consumerism differs much from the puritan, civic/republican, Marxist and environmentalist traditions as it cuts all the way down into the identity formation processes of modern western societies (Kaza 2005: 140f). Consumerism is not only a way of acquiring and accumulating goods, but a vehicle for freedom, ideology, class distinction and also the rights of the civil subject. Thus, as an example, in a dynamic of consumerist dependency on individualization, puritan or ideological arguments deny the very processes of desire and subjectivity, but 'from a Buddhist perspective, ego-based views of self are fundamentally mistaken, promoting ignorance and suffering' (2005: 142). Instead, we need to 'practice with desire', which is something very

different from simply becoming 'aware' and then just change to the better. If applied to fashion, the question is not to overcome the delusional 'magic' of the commodity or sexual fetish, or, denying the cheap copy, to seek the authentic (and expensive) original, but to learn to move through non-duality to other types of timelessness, perhaps with some inspiration from Vajrayana, Tantrism and the Aghoris.

Kaza's discussion resonates well with the 'Buddhist economy' suggested by economic thinker E. F. Schumacher. As Schumacher (1973) posits, an economy built on the ethics of Buddhism differs radically from economics of modern materialism, especially on the fundamental levels of drives, values and labour. In its normative calling, it addresses the deeper value system of capitalism (Alexandrin 1993). Yet, it primarily still remains a vision as the late-capitalist current is dependent on growth and a 'just-can't-get-enough' mentality (Payne 2010).

Instead, one could also think of more probing studies in applying eastern models of thinking, which to a large degree break with the Abrahamic framework. For example, as highlighted in the discussion above, distinctions between good/evil, virtue/sin and flesh/soul, which also echo throughout the study of dress, can be complemented with other conceptual models, addressing other sensibilities to Being, not least suffering, impermanence and karma. Such inclusion of perspectives may better help us explore and describe the delicate but magical situation that is the fashioned human condition.

Following the suggestion of The Met guide to see how Kawakubo breaks down the imaginary walls between dualisms, 'exposing their artificiality and arbitrariness' (The Met Web 2017), scholars of fashion studies may diffract the many cultural perspectives of the world against the western concepts, to expose new dimensions for the analysis of fashion, beyond a vague 'in-between' in the eyes of the western observer. For fashion studies, this would involve engaging with a multitude of new cultural concepts, but perhaps first acknowledging the hidden Abrahamic roots in the foundational concepts that most of these studies are grounded in. There is a lot to gain beyond the limiting definitions of western convention, and there are new worlds and dimensions to be discovered through these openings. As Kawakubo points to in her use of intended imperfections in her 'lace' sweater: 'To me they're not tears. Those are openings that give the fabric another dimension' (The Met 2017: 14).

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