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Altman on Jacobs on Dior: Fashion Through Fractals and Archives

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Abstract

On February 25, 2011, the fashion luxury company Christian Dior suspended John Galliano, who had been its creative director since 1996, after his arrest over making anti-Semitic remarks at a Paris bar. Quickly following his suspension, a video from December 2010 was distributed showing Galliano hurling anti-Semitic invectives at several bar patrons. On March 1, 2011, Dior fired Galliano. At stake in the considerable interest and speculations regarding who takes over at Dior is control of a €24.6B business empire and access to a historic couturier's archive. In this sense, its designer will influence the label's "books" both financial and what will be stored in its physical repository as part of the brand's creative and artistic repertoire. Despite fashion's apparent ubiquity, the anticipation surrounding who takes over at Dior is proof that despite fashion's professed democratization, there still exists a fashion hierarchy with Dior occupying its upper echelon. Since Galliano's dismissal, fashion insiders have moved from breathlessly feverish in their speculations to desperately calling out for relief in the face of an unexpectedly drawn-out waiting game that is now over a year old and otherwise an eternity in fashion's hyper accelerated production cycle. To purposely counter fashion's accelerated internal clock, the purpose of this commentary is to keep fashion in a reflective state rather than a reflexive stance and uses fashion on film, and specifically Robert Altman's Prêt-à-Porter (1994), to give cultural and historical context to all the online speculation and chatter. Altman's film is the fractal, or the repeating pattern, in a dramatized form, as well as the cultural archive against which to examine the entangled relations of the designer Marc Jacobs, Dior's quest for a new designer and the elusive figure of the ingénue.

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ninagarcia Nina Garcia
#onefashionwishfor2012 Can we please know who is going to replace Galliano at Dior?
2 Jan

Prefaced with the hashtag #onewishfor2012, the wish was tweeted by Nina Garcia, fashion director at fashion magazine *Marie Claire* and judge on the hit TV show "Project Runway." Garcia's wish to the twitterverse articulated a desire shared by many insiders in fashion's concentric circles from bloggers to print magazine editors to their readers and legions of self-anointed fashionistas. One of fashion's most esteemed couturiers was without a head designer. On February 25, 2011, Dior suspended John Galliano, who had been at its creative director since 1996, after his arrest over making anti-Semitic remarks at a Paris bar.



Amongst other things, Galliano was quoted as saying "I love Hitler!"[1]

Quickly following his suspension, a video from December 2010 was distributed showing Galliano hurling anti-Semitic invectives at several bar patrons. On March 1, 2011, Dior fired Galliano. To borrow the tagline from Garcia's show, "one minute you're in, the next you're out."

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[1] Lo 2011.

Since the Fall/Winter 2011 collection (shown four months after Galliano was fired), Dior has been without an official designer and has relied on the designs of Galliano's longtime assistant, Bill Gaytten who was widely seen as a placeholder rather than the eventual replacement. Since Galliano's dismissal, fashion insiders have moved from breathlessly feverish in their speculations to desperately calling out for relief in the face of an unexpectedly drawn-out waiting game now eleven months in the making. Being made to wait is anathema to fashion's modus operandi and an affront to its sensibilities for the modern, the "new" and, more recently, its own ubiquity from "flash" to "fast" to "pop-up" fashion all for the sake of cross-platform commercialism under the guise of "accessibility."

This essay draws from the popular channels of public discourse that has popularized fashion and contributed to its contradictory and inverse sense of heightened publicity and increasing insularity exemplified by the considerable attention, speculation and general hand-wringing over who will be named Dior's head designer. Social media outlets from Twitter to Facebook along with the more traditional channels of fashion magazines and trade and industry newspapers along with the shrinking coterie of fashion reporters and journalists who are increasingly being elbowed out of the front rows of fashion shows (and attendant trend-and-opinion setting) by fashion bloggers have congealed to form a formidable medium of communication and constant source of information or speculation to a wide audience regarding a very specific topic- the future of a couturier- that remains a rarified world of producers for an elite and ever shrinking clientele. This virtual but ever polyvocal orchestra of opinions is the medium for the exchange and transfer of information as a street or public square would have served in another age. At stake in the considerable interest and speculations regarding who takes over at Dior is control of a €24.6B[2] business empire and access to a historic couturier's archive. In this sense, its designer will influence the label's "books" both financial and what will be stored in its physical repository as part of the brand's creative and artistic repertoire. Despite fashion's apparent ubiquity, where having a fashion label now seems to be a rite of passage for every reality television celebrity, the anticipation surrounding who takes over at Dior is proof that despite fashion's professed democratization, there still exists a fashion hierarchy with Dior occupying its upper echelon. To purposely counter fashion's accelerated internal clock, the purpose of this commentary is to keep fashion in a reflective state rather than a reflexive stance and uses fashion on film, and specifically Robert Altman's Prêt-à-Porter (1994), to give cultural and historical context to all the online speculation and chatter. Altman's film is the fractal, or the repeating pattern, in a dramatized form, as well as the cultural archive against which to examine the entangled relations of the designer Marc Jacobs, Dior's quest for a new designer and the elusive figure of the ingénue.

The kinship is ripe. First, both fashion and film are forms of art without art's

[2] Bloomberg BusinessWeek.

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cache. The way film and fashion are made, watched (in the case of film or its variants from movies to blockbusters) or worn (in the case of fashion) is markedly different from the way a painting is made. The instances when fashion become art, such as Yves Saint Laurent's "Mondrian dress" from 1965, is when the dress assumes the painting and otherwise literally becomes the "art."[3] Second, since the point of this commentary is to extend fashion into a reflective state from its current reflexive stance, then there can be no more appropriate lens than the lingering, drawn out panorama of Altman's camera which are a trademark of his films as much as his large cast and improvised, overlapping dialogue. "The pictures they make these days are all MTV" laments Walter Stuckel in Altman's *The Player* (1992). "Cut, cut, cut! The opening shot of "Touch of Evil was six and a half minutes long" as the scene Altman cleverly films, of which this dialogue was a part, clocks in at 9 minutes and 42 seconds. Finally, valued as art forms but debated for its merit as art proper, fashion and film form a wayward bond through its exclusion. Despite its title, *Prêt-à-Porter* is not concerned with ready-to-wear or mass-produced and "off-the-rack" fashion but haute couture or "high fashion" characterized by custom-fittings, a Paris atelier and the presentation of a collection of day and evening wear twice a year.[4]

I: Street Couture

While haute couture is a rarified world, it is not hermetically sealed from the street which it is conventionally understood as diametrically opposed. Indeed, another reason so much attention has been focused on who will head Dior is because of the effects that will trickle down from the atelier to the street just as from what influences, including the street, the new designer will draw. In Galliano's case, however, the street, as artistic influence or reference for couture, was secondary to street as site for couture's denoument. If only Galliano had stayed home that night. His alleged addiction to prescription painkillers and alcohol that unleashed his anti-Semitic rant would have remained hidden. What would continue to be public and visible was the couture he designed and sent down the runway at Dior for 14 years. In the wake of the video's circulation and Galliano's dismissal, a parallel discourse to the narrative condemning his anti-Semitic outbursts emerged articulating the extreme pressures faced by designers. The head of a fashion public relations firm expressed the changing timetable and pace of production expected of the fashion industry:

[3] The debate regarding whether or not fashion and clothing is art is long standing. Artist and writer Jeff Weinstein's is correct when he proposes: 1) clothing can be displayed, priced, collected and appreciated as art as other art objects are and the task is to "to judge whether they are good or bad art remains the task of the viewers, critics and even those who dare to wear the art in question." and,; 2) clothing is a form of soft sculpture: "It's a vessel for the body; the body completes the artwork." See Weinstein, Jeff. "Is Clothing Art?." *Fashion Statements: On Style, Appearance and Reality*. Ed. Ronn Scapp and Ed. Brian Seitz. NewYork: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010. 69-72.

[4] Martin and Koda.

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> Globalization, digitalization — the speed and scope of our work — has added a tremendous amount of pressure not only to the creative field but everyone in this industry. I would venture to say we are all doing at least twice as much work twice as fast as we were five years ago.[5]

While respected fashion editor Susy Menkes noted that Galliano's racist tirade "deserved the nearly-universal condemnation they were receiving," Menkes contextualized Galliano- famous, the best paid, alone, clutching a glass in a bar- within an industry that has seen a disproportionate number of high profile breakdowns:

> The pressure from fast fashion and from the instant internet age to create new things constantly has worn down other famous names. Marc Jacobs, design director of Louis Vuitton, ended a wild streak in rehab. Calvin Klein famously rambled across a sports pitch and admitted to substance abuse. And the late Yves Saint Laurent spent a lifetime fighting his demons. Above all, the suicide of Alexander McQueen, a year almost to the day before Mr. Galliano's public disgrace, is a spectre that hangs over the fashion industry.[6]

New York Times fashion critic Cathy Horyn underscored the challenges faced by designers not just to produce but to produce something "new":

> The problem goes beyond having to produce multiple collections a year; it's the nearly brutalizing feeling that something new and relevant must be communicated each season."[7]

The "new" presents a dichotomous conundrum for the fashion industry. Its rationale is to capture the present moment and render it through clothes. Even when working within an archives or a set of influences from the past, the task is to translate and interpret and otherwise "modernize." Christian Dior's greatest and longest lasting contribution to fashion was, after all, famously called the "New Look" from his 1947 collection which emphasized a tiny waist blooming into a wide skirt made from luxurious fabrics.[8] Yet the emphasis on contemporary designers in their capacities as "creative directors" who oversee "brands" and an expanding range of goods is to not just produce their signature look that may come as the sum of their career but, rather, several looks, several times a year for a heightened production schedule that is not necessarily in synch or conducive to a creative timetable or temperament. Whereas the task was once to produce *the* New Look, the activity is now to produce *as many* looks as possible. In its wake, according to Menkes, Horyn et al, are fashion designers like Galliano who crack under its pressure.

[5] *Fashionologie.*
[6] Milligan 2011.
[7] *Fashionologie.*
[8] Pochna 1994.

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Yet the "street" and all that it connotes never lingers far from the haute couture atelier. Fashion as a business rather than as art or culture or heritage is precisely why Galliano had to go. At stake was Dior as a business worth €24.6B in annual sales. Karl Lagerfeld, who has become by default the senior statesman of fashion, was quick to criticize Galliano:

> "The thing is, we are a business world where, especially today, with the internet, one has to be more careful than ever, especially if you are a publicly known person…You cannot go in the street and be drunk." [9]

The fantasy world of high fashion Galliano inhabited and which he had come to represent was thrust against the reality of the indicting[10] video of his tirade at *La Perle* that could be played and replayed at will and on demand through various social media streams and countless communication outlets. By Lagerfeld's standard and litmus test, the dam holding back Galliano's inability to deal with the pressure of the fashion world's pressures would have eventually cracked and broken. That it happened in public, in a popular bar on a busy thoroughfare in the Marais, on Rue Vieille du Temple, on the street (as it were) rather than at home was co-incidental.



La Perle on Rue Vieille du Temple in the Marais[11] (Photo from the author.)

[9] Milligan, Lauren. "Karl's Take." *Vogue (UK)*. 02 Mar 2011: n. page. Web. 23 Apr. 2012. <http://www.vogue.co.uk/news/2011/03/02/karl-lagerfeld-fashion-world-comment-on-john-

[10] The term "indicting" is used here in the technical sense: Galliano was indicted of making "public insults based on the origin, religious affiliation, race or ethnicity" of the individuals he encountered at the bar. See Kingsbury, Alex. "Designer John Galliano to Stand Trial in Paris." *US News & World Report*. 07 Mar 2011: n. page. Web. 23 Apr. 2012. On September 8, 2011, Galliano was found guilty of the charge. See Angelique, Chrisafis. "John Galliano Found Guilty of Racist and Antisemitic Abuse." *Guardian* [London] 08 Sep 2011, n. pag. Web. 23 Apr.

[11] Sciolino 2011.

The co-dependent tension between fashion insiders and the masses, designers and the public, the blurring of drama presented on the runway with the spectacle on the street and in a bar and the otherwise dissolution of the boundary between fashion fact and fiction is present in Robert Altman's Prêt-à-Porter that used the Fall/Winter 1994 Paris haute couture presentations as a backdrop with actors from the movie interacting with designers, models and the press. The question of who would take over Dior was a mise-en-abyme that involved standing between fashion's past and its future only to find the reproduction of one's own image. Altman's film is the fractal, or the repeating pattern, in a dramatized form, as well as the cultural and historical archive against which Dior's present day dilemma unfolds and can be analyzed. There is the image from the real video of Galliano spewing anti-Semitic slurs that precipitated his dismissal from Dior. And still there is the other image from seventeen years prior of Gianfranco Ferré, then Dior's head designer, in Altman's Prêt-à-Porter. As a sidewalk or a street can have two or multiple lanes of traffic going in opposite direction, a parallel cast of fashion characters existed within the singular universe cast by the camera's frame (upon which recent turn of events are superimposed). Designers with well established reputations such as Sonia Rykiel, Christian Lacroix, Issey Miyake (along with the aforementioned Ferré), crossed paths with fashion designers that existed only in Altman's sartorial and filmic universe from the matriarch Simone Lo (whose clothes the audience, for good reason, never gets to see), the hip-hop and street-wear influenced Cy Bianco who literalized his street and underground credentials by holding his fashion show in an abandoned Metro station to the Romantic and Baroque salon presentation of the effete Cort Romney with a taste for the dramatic, lavish and opulent who, with a squint of the viewer's eye, would bear more than a passing resemblance to John Galliano…

II: Altman and *Prêt-à-Porter*

Prêt-à-Porter occupies an odd place in Altman's already peculiar, anti-establishmentarian career as one of Hollywood's most celebrated outsiders, its resident denizen and beloved misanthrope who loved making movies but didn't care at all for the politics inevitably involved in getting movies made. *Prêt-à-Porter* happened twenty years after the most prolific period in Altman's career in the 1970s when he made a string of films that were startling for their artistic originality, range and vision starting with the anti-war satire *M*A*S*H* (1970); *Brewster McCloud* (1971) about a boy who wanted to fly; *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* (1972) that reshuffled conventions of the American Western just as he would with the convention of noir film in *The Long Goodbye* (1973). This artistically fertile period in Altman's career, in synch with the work of contemporaries like Stanley Kubrick, Francis Ford Coppola and Martin Scorsese formed a golden era of American cinema culminating for Altman with the sprawling political epic *Nashville* (1975) about the politics surrounding the entrance of a third party candidate to the US Presidential elections.

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While Altman made some notable and even remarkable movies like the psychological thriller *3 Women* in 1977 or the study of melancholic obsession and celebrity in *Come Back to the Five and Dime Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean* in 1982, he floundered during the 1980s and the era of the Spielbergian blockbusters. His attempt to adapt to this changing movie landscape and make a crowd pleaser- 1980's *Popeye*- was critically skewered and commercially ignored. Altman's films would be out of fashion for most of the next decade and would be resuscitated with the small character driven *Vincent and Theo* (1990). Altman would return to prominence as an American auteur with 1992's *The Player*, an acerbic skewering the Hollywood movie system followed by *Short Cuts* (1993), an adaptation of Raymond Carver's short stories turned into a sprawling three-and-a-half hour study of intersecting lives in Los Angeles. *Prêt-à-Porter* came during this revival that would also mark its end. Subsequent movies like *Kansas City* (1996), *The Gingerbread Man* (1998, Altman's commercial foray into the stable of John Grisham book-to-movies offerings that was a staple of the 1990s), *Cookie's Fortune* (1998) and *Dr. T and the Women* (2000) would receive faint to mildly respectable critical attention, scant box office receipts and nowhere near the kind of cultural influence of his other movies.[12]

The critical reviews for *Prêt-à-Porter* were scathing. Janet Maslin of the *New York Times* called the film "slack, bleached and hazy" and "scriptless"[13] while Altman's obituary in the *Telegraph* (he passed away in November 2006) remembered the film for being a "disaster" or falling "into the trap of being banal by depicting banality."[14] Altman's attempt to weave together a scripted storyline about the murder of French fashion's highest ranking executive interspersed with footage from Paris fashion week and impromptu interviews with designers gave viewers neither enough filmic narrative or documentarian reality to satiate the appetite for either. As if unsure whether to go for the adorned, intricate, embossed creation of couture or the unembellished, wash-and-wear practicality of ready-to-wear, Altman's *Prêt-à-Porter* ended up with a mixing of styles that served neither the purpose of an elegant dinner party or a necessary errand to the grocery store. *Prêt-à-Porter* refused some standard documentarian techniques, even visual cues like shaky hand held camera work to give the movie a sense of authenticity in order to extend to the viewer that what was unfolding was "real," (a technique that worked so well in *Unzipped* (1995) about designer Isaac Mizrahi's FW '94 collection). Neither was the movie's main storyline narrative rigorous enough to contain all of its moving fictional bits and pieces that was narratively threaded together by two opposing reporters, the sober *New York Times* journalist Fiona Ulrich and the tabloid FAD TV's Kitty Potter, a perky, blond Southern reporter ambushing designers and models as they stepped off the runway.

[12] Altman would see critical and commercial success for his one of his last movie's, 2001's *Gosford Park*. Collecting seven Academy Award nominations including Best Picture and Best Director, the movie would also go on to make $87 million at the box office.
[13] Maslin,1994.
[14] "The final interview."

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While lacking the vigor of some Altman's signature work, *Prêt-à-Porter* is neither entirely "slack, bleached and hazy." Its purportedly bloated and deflated parts is precisely what makes it appropriate for diagnosing the gulf between fashion and contemporary society at the same time that fashion is an expression of the culture of which it is a part. There are a few moments of reality in *Prêt-à-Porter* that are startling for the way they are overtaken by the banal such as when Kitty Porter corners Harry Belafonte to ask him about his latest project. With the movie encroaching on Belafonte's real life progressive civil rights activism (from his involvement with the Peace Corps to the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee to his support of the Castro administration and his long standing criticism of interventionist US foreign policy), Belafonte answers that his new movie is about Reagan getting re-elected, Nancy running a shadow secret government and Ollie North as Secretary of Health. At this moment, Isabel de la Fontaine, wife of the "murdered" Olivier, faints and pandemonium ensues, Kitty forgets about Harry and his timely political satire as she shrieks to the camera "Is she dead? Is she dead?" only to answer her question a few second later "She isn't dead." And, repeating with emphasis: "She is NOT dead" with an urgent and confused tone in her voice as if unsure which story line would have been the better scoop. Either way, the political narrative commentary offered by Belafonte is displaced by a literally dramatic fashion moment. Fashion's trumping of politics would not be out of place in today's news cycles with its obsession on celebrities and personalities over politics which itself has been turned into another rung on the entertainment ladder much as Galliano's slurs were routed into this stream of news and entertainment.

III: Contender

Chief amongst the roster of names touted to lead Dior after Galliano's dismissal was Marc Jacobs who stoked speculations with his Spring-Summer 2012 show for Louis Vuitton (which he has headed since 1997). Featuring a giant spinning carousel with snow white horses and models wearing Easter egg shaded dresses with cut-outs and appliques of daisies layered in tulle and feathers, the show was seen as Jacobs' nod to couture. If the attention to a woman's figure and the intricate craftsmanship of the clothes weren't enough to signal Jacobs' overture to Dior's heritage and focus on femininity, his post-show interview were seen as a sign of an imminent move. Asked about the show's theme, Jacobs said he viewed the carousel as

> "...a bit of a metaphor, and this cycle of fashion, and how it just goes around and around. And regardless of what your references are, everybody has them, and it's just cyclical. It's whatever you just choose to look at but it's just a kind of a circle. It just goes around."[15]

[15] "Marc Jacobs happy at Louis Vuitton."

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Jacobs gives us two theories of fashion as being either cyclical with everything coming back in style or where everything old will eventually be new again and, likewise, where everything new will, once again, be old. The other is that fashion, like case or precedent law, is based on history and what has come before. Fashion, in this sense, is cumulative.



Marc Jacobs being interviewed after his Spring/Sumer 2012 show for Louis Vuitton.

While these two valid schools of thought of how fashion is made and remade through the ages may be where Jacobs' ideas on fashion registers these days as he works with his design team in his studio, it is also the opposite to how he once practiced fashion, most notably with his infamous "grunge" collection for Perry Ellis in 1992 that cast him as an immediate star. Taking what he saw at nightclubs and on the street- tartan plaid shirts, beanies, henleys, fishnet stockings- Jacobs remade these pedestrian street clothes in cashmere, silk and other luxurious fabrics. Jacobs elevated the status of these clothes and showed that fashion's compass and its trajectory was from the street to the runway and from the sidewalk to the store. In remaking the clothes of a particular generation's youth culture and endowing them with the label of "fashion" by content (in terms of materials and fabrics) as well as form (by placing them in the showroom and the storeroom), Jacobs helped to transform and reroute how individual clothes and generational style became iconicized and radicalized from

something that was just worn to something that was at once "fashion" and "fashionable." It also got Jacobs fired from Perry Ellis. Taking ideas from the street put Marc Jacobs on the street. Even his couture-inflected presentation for Louis Vuitton cannot get away from the street. The carousel that inspired him was drawn from the carousel in the Jardin de Tuileries and the carousels that are part of the annual spring and summer fair that plants itself in the park. Once the garden of a royal palace whose inhabitants would have been the original clientele of haute couture, only the grounds now remain as converted public parks for the masses riding carousels in off-the-rack and otherwise ready-to-wear.



The carousel at the annual summer Fête des Tuileries. (Photo from the author.)

IV: Archives

In the immediate glow of a very well-received show merging cotton candy whimsy and couture craftsmanship, Jacobs claimed that fashion is cyclical. Yet historically reviewing his own career trajectory and what made him one of fashion's luminaries, there is evidence for his visceral connection to the street as the source of fashion. Jacobs' use of the term "references" and the invocation of the past as inevitable points of influence is about the importance of the archives to fashion. Fashion's emphasis on the new and the modern does not preclude the importance of history. While fashion is about creation (of something that is new and original or of something that is copied and produced on a large scale),

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fashion is also about preservation of styles, silhouettes, craft and technique of which haute couture embodies and which Dior has come to epitomize. As such, Jacobs' potential move to Dior carries with it the tantalizing prospect of having access to Dior's historic archive with the inevitable mixing and synthesizing of that existing archive with his own creative vision, style and techniques.

From academic disciplines, especially postcolonial studies whose task has been to sift through its colonial past in terms of actual records and documents along with the psychic imprint left behind by its colonial masters, we know that the archives is not just a place of storage.[16] The archives aren't just a catalogue or vault of drawings and patterns from years past. Nor is the archive a storage funhouse like the mythical *Vogue* accessories closet to which Carrie Bradshaw is introduced in Season 4 of *Sex and the City* when she starts freelancing for the magazine. Entering this Alice in Wonderland of fashion, Carrie finds Manolo Blahnik Mary Janes that she excitedly shrieks: "I thought these were the stuff of urban shoe myth!" Contrary to Ms. Bradshaw's wide-eyed wonder, the archives isn't just a place of recovery and discovery of exotic and tantalizing objects lost, unbeknownst and all of a sudden magically found.

On the one hand, the archives are repository of the past and a site of accumulated knowledge. Yet on the other, there can be multiple archives in fashion from its multiple audiences. There is the official trade narrative of style and its various permutations in industry magazines and corresponding back issues or back catalogues. The paper trail of fashion is catalogued not just centrally and officially in libraries, museums and fashion magazine offices but, as part of popular culture, in the personal collection and libraries of individual readers. The advent of technological media like Youtube has allowed individual users and fashion labels alike to upload video recordings of fashion shows and other related materials that preserve, disseminate and otherwise archivize fashion. And of course, fashion's material imprint is also diffused and present in storerooms and closets of people who own and wear the goods as one of their primary intentions: "clothes." These archives are created simultaneously with the fashion labels "official" archives composed of the designer's sketches, fabric samples, mood boards, photographs and other materials related to the process of designing a collection. While fashion's archives are arguably diffuse, these official materials and the look they produce engender the label's overall style and aesthetic. Rather than just a site of storage, the "official" archives, as Elizabeth Povinelli argued, can orient us historically towards the past and ideologically and ethically steer us towards how we act and feel in the present and in the future.[17]

The archive is an accounting and documentation of a group of people by itself and both for itself and for others or an imagined audience in the future. In the process of cataloguing itself, the archive is a genealogical account of a group's

[16] Stoler 2010; Chakrabarty 2002; Derrida 1998; Trouillot 1995; Guha and Spivak, 1988.
[17] Povinelli 2011.

lineage and the group, whether or not they are already, becomes a family. Family exists in the form of people related through various means who come together for specific purposes much like fashion's family gathers for its biannual fashion week as in *Prêt-à-Porter*. In the movie, taste, sensibility and marriage along with blood are the multiple ways through which family is made or, rather, cobbled for one season and one collection for the purpose of putting together a fashion show. While a designer may have his or her trusted assistant and a corps of patternmakers and seamstresses and fabric suppliers, there are also elements of this fashion "family" that change from season to season like the models seen on the runway. Family has elements that are fixed and stable as well as ad hoc and improvisational and for hire. The affection within family is not always tender but sometimes purely transactional. It is from family and our archives of experiences with them that our interactions with other people and the rest of the world take shape. Family, our first source of affiliation is our first source of loyalty as well as our first sense of betrayal.

There is no better proof of this than in designer Simone Lo's son, Jack, who has sold her fashion house, unbeknownst to her, to a Texan conglomerate keen on actively remaking the couturier. One of Clint Lammeraux' first order of business for the House of Lo is the introduction of the quintessentially Texan cowboy boot bearing the house's logo as if only as an afterthought. Jack's sale of his mother's company without her knowledge and Lammeraux' less than delicate incursion into the world of French haute couture is not so much a case of familial betrayal (in Jack's case) or cultural colonization (in Clint's case) however unethical and inelegant each action may have been. Rather, another way to look at this sale of a cultural archive and its radical wholesale remodeling is as a cultural edict of globalization to consume not just for the sake of satiating its own appetite but to do so in a way that remakes what it consumes in its own image. The new Texan owners don't know anything about French haute couture: they know about boots so it is boots they will make only this time with the House of Lo's logo. The cultural dissonance between the French couturier and their new Texan owners is revealed when Slim Chrysler, Lammereaux' financial partner, is handing out mismatched boots to the models to wear for the show. As it turns out, Slim is color-blind.

V: Ingenues

One of the most striking things about Altman's films in any of his "periods" is the presence of an ingénue who is at once eager for the spotlight and unexpectedly thrust into it. The ingénue is a stock character who is "an innocent, artless, or unsophisticated young girl."[18] Enchanting, wide-eyed and pure, the ingénue is also extremely delicate and fragile against the dangers of the world. Fashion depends on the ingénue or young talent and new designers who keep a house or label in production long after its founding designer has

[18] Macdowell 2010, 129.

retired or died. As an increasingly commercial enterprise concerned with bottom lines on a balance sheet in a truncated production ecology that has quickened the pace from the design studio to the catwalk to the rack, the ingénue does not have much time to be an ingénue and is subject to being replaced by countless other ingénues. This ritual of succession is given full exposure in Altman's movies. During his most critically acclaimed period of the 1970s of which *Nashville* was his masterpiece, Barbara Jean, the emotionally fragile and weak but absolutely beloved country music star was shadowed and trailed by legions of adoring fans including the wannabe singer Connie White. If Barbara Jean drew audiences with her earnest tales of working class heartache in a plain, unadorned voice, Connie was willing to resort to anything to become a star including stripping at a political fundraiser while crooning, out of key, "I Just Can't Get Enough" to the hoots and hollers of men holding glasses of whiskey and fingering cigars. But when crisis strikes and Connie has the chance to step in for Barbara Jean, Connie freezes at either the terror of what's happened to her idol, the realization of what fame entails or the limits of her own singing ability which is mediocre at best. At this moment of panic, it is Albuquerque, a housewife who has spent the entire movie trying to run away from her husband, who takes the mic and calms the crowd through the trauma they have just collectively witnessed in a sing-a-long and an extended call and response.



Barbara Harris as "Albuquerque" in *Nashville* (1975)

In Altman's revival during the 1990's of which *Prêt-à-Porter* was a part, it is Kitty Potter, the roving tabloid journalist (rather than a designer) who experiences a breakdown. Equal parts protest and resignation at the loss of her house and name to the Texan conglomerate, Simone Lowenthal decides to show no clothes for her fashion show (not even the "House of Lo" stamped Texas boots). She sends her models down the runway naked to which the loquacious Kitty, always usually eager to ingratiate herself to her interviewee and her imagined

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audiences at home, becomes visibly flustered and increasingly upset at the seeming absurdity of Simone Lo's show:

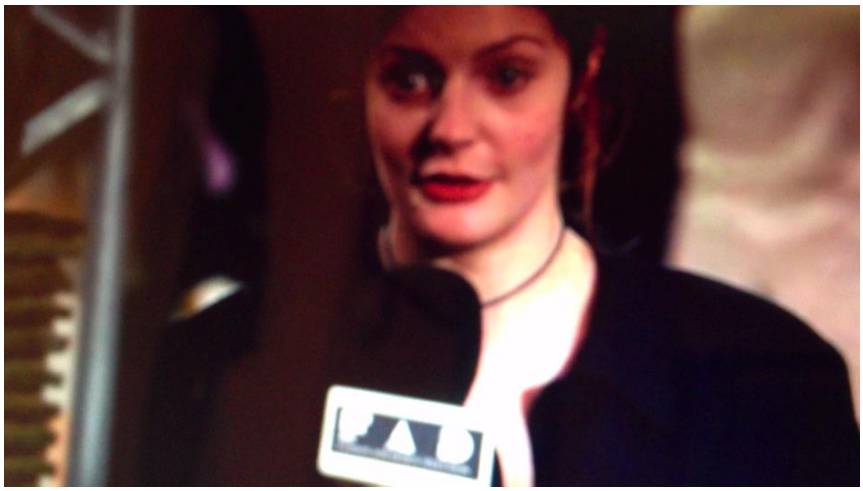
> This is Kitty Potter, live from Paris at Simone Lo's defile. Well! What can I say? Simone Lo has shown us everything! [Audience Applauding] I mean, I don't know how much of this is gonna be on TV or anything...but, it's-- it's-- it's so new. I mean, it's, uh, it's so old. I mean, it's, uh-- I mean, she shows it like it really is. [Cheering, Whistling] It's, uh, it's so old, it's true. It's so true, it's new. It's the oldest new look. It's the newest old look. It's-- It's--Simone Lo has created a-- a new, new look...for every man, woman and child. And they can all afford it. It's called the "bare look." So, hooray for Simone Lo. What the hell am I talkin' about? I mean, wh-wh-- For Christ's sake, wh-wh-what is goin' on here, really? Can you tell me what's goin' on on this planet? Th-this is fuckin' fruitcake time. I mean, is that fashion? Is it? I mean, is there a message out there? I mean, you got a lot of naked people wanderin' around here. I mean, I been forever trying to find out what this bullshit is all about, and you know what? You know what? I have had it. I have had it. Goodbye. Au revoir. Sophie, you got yourself a career.

As Kitty's implacable, unflappable veneer cracks, it is up to her assistant Sophie, who up to now has been holding cue cards and brushing Kitty's hair in between takes, to provide the needed commentary for live television which she does with aplomb:

> This is Sophie Choiset for FAD-TV. In May 1968, the great couturier Balenciaga closed his atelier forever because, he said, "There is no one left to dress." It appears Simone Lo believes the same. - [Synchronized Applause] - She has just shown us a celebration of fashion in the profoundest sense of the word. She has made a statement here today that will be felt for decades to come. She's made a choice that will influence all designers everywhere. [Audience Cheering, Whistling] And most of all, she has spoken to women the world over...telling them not about what to wear...but how to think about what they want and need from fashion. This is Sophie Choiset in Paris for FAD-TV. Ca va?

Providing more answers than the superficial banter Kitty soft-lobbed and moon-balled to her interviewees, Sophie has given an on the spot historical contextualization and analysis of what the audience just witnessed. The fashion show, filtered through Sophie's lens, is given a historical treatment harkening back to Balenciaga, one of fashion's grand couturiers and showing the ingénue's ability to step into the role newly vacant role.

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Chiara Mastroianni as "Sophie Choiset" in *Prêt-à-Porter* (1994)

The question of the ingénue expresses the tension between interiority and exteriority for fashion's legacy, lineage and succession issues. When a couturier replaces its designer, does it draw from within its own ranks or does it draw from a wider horizon? The ascension of ingénues in Altman's movies receives visual and thematic correlation in the way he takes the viewer into spaces that are simultaneously and successively private and public for the enactment of a variety of spectacles. In Prêt-à-Porter, there is a continuum of location, spaces and states of the affective and the national type. Following the opening shot of a poster advertising the signature Dior perfume "Poison" through a window, the camera focuses on a man in a coat, fur hat and glasses partaking in one of the hallmarks of urban activity: shopping in a department store. He walks out of the store with a Dior tie and into Red Square. Traversing space and time, the scene shifts from Moscow to Paris in the time it takes for the credits to roll where a white gloved butler is handing the day's mail to his master who unwraps the Dior package from the top of the pile revealing the tie we saw chosen at the Moscow department store a few minutes earlier. An exchange of private and public spaces- a bedroom, the backstage of a fashion show- leads us to an airport where the two men are able to identify each other amongst the throngs that have descended onto Paris for its biannual fashion week because they are wearing the same turquoise, patterned Dior tie. In a crowded public space where anonymity is the rule, fashion and an article of clothing is a code that can be deciphered between the knowing.

The action shifts to an especially grid locked Pont Alexandre III with its un-mistakable columns featuring the golden Pegasus harnessed by La renommées with Les Invalides in the distance. Alongside the stuck cars, trucks and buses is a fashion photo shoot featuring a model wearing a coat of multi-colored teddy bears. Within this urban milieu of the classical and the contemporary, the antiquarian and the whimsical, the revered and the ridiculous are the two fashion coordinated men in a chauffeured car locked in argumentative conversation that is halted when one of the men, the recipient of the Dior tie, chokes on a ham sandwich he is eating without abandon. The other man exits

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the car. As the chauffeur yells "Arrêtez le meurtrier!" the man weaves through stalled traffic, slides across a car's hood and, in a bold bid for escape, jumps off the Pont Alexandre and into the cold, gray waters of the Seine. The "murder" of Olivier de la Fontaine, head of the Chambre syndicale de la haute couture, in the at once public and private space of his car on the Pont Alexandre, sets in motion the dramatic narrative for Altman's *Prêt-à-Porter*. If videos of Galliano, bleary eyed and slurring invectives, can be replayed to relive the real-life moment of his imminent and eventual downfall, the escape and identity of Olivier de la Fontaine's "murderer" was reconstructed for police through pictures that captured the man's clothing. High fashion crimes are the running thread between fact and fiction.

The *mise-en-abyme* technique of an image within an image and the focus on interiority are epitomized by dueling reporters, and accidental roommates, Anne Eisenhower and Joe Flynn, who spend the entire movie in their hotel room as news of Olivier's death and the fashion shows stream live through the television. It is by looking at the television that Joe recognizes his sports jacket from his stolen luggage that has forced him to spend most of the movie in his hotel room dressed only in a bathrobe. "Hey! That's my jacket!" he screams at the television. Altman's breaching and puncturing of fashion's follies (and its apparently thin skin) got him banned from Lagerfeld, Saint Laurent and Valentino who are notably absent from the movie. Yet *Prêt-à-Porter* depends on operating from within a generally recognizable universe with familiar references hence the dispersal of fake designers with real life designers or the re-enactment of scenes from previous movies such as the famous strip tease scene with Sophia Loren and Marcelo Mastroianni from Vittorio di Sica's 1964 film *Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow*. "I needed a cast with famous faces the audience would recognize, as there were so many characters and no plot to speak of," said Altman. "If I'd had brilliant actors no one was familiar with, then the audience wouldn't have known who was who."[19] The issue of anonymity and the public's ability to identify actors and locate them within a cultural horizon registers on the same scale as the questions facing fashion labels when deciding on a successor. Does a label hire a recognizable name or an unknown talent? Viewed from this perspective, the question is in the vein of the ingénue. But with fashion's particular need to balance the old and the new, how new does one have to be to qualify as an ingénue in order to navigate both the archive and the street?

VI: Ingenews

While now one of fashion's luminaries, there was a time when Marc Jacobs was a fashion ingénue thrust into the spotlight at Perry Ellis and, soon after, cast away. While several major designers on both sides of the Atlantic were rumored for the job of leading Dior, Marc Jacobs' appointment would have seemed like

[19] Thompson 2006, 171.

the next step in his professional evolution from fashion ingénue at Perry Ellis where he popularized street wear with the era defining "grunge" look to his present day perch as global luxury tastemaker at Louis Vuitton. Furthermore, Bernard Arnault, the Chairman of Dior and LVMH (or the luxury brand conglomerate Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton of which Dior is the main holding company) was speculated as most likely to hire and promote from within his stable of designers. The installation of Dior's new designer was cast as a high-level and luxurious game of chess where the move of one designer would determine another subsequent move of another designer to another brand. While Bernard Arnault is no Robert Altman (indeed, Arnault represents the kind of gargantuan corporate entity with which Altman would have bristled for stifling and curtailing artistic freedom), Arnault, too, has a corps of young, talented ingénues waiting in the wings ready for fashion's latest and most coveted challenge. The well tread story (as far as such speculations are worth since they started buzzing immediately after Galliano was suspended and then fired) was that if Jacobs moved to Dior, the vacant spot at Vuitton would be filled by Phoebe Philo which would create an opening at Celine. The installation of someone at Dior, in the LVMH family, can be seen as a succession which may make rational sense on paper based on experience, sales record, temperament as well as patronage but the problem with succession is that it leaves others, perhaps equally qualified, out of the equation altogether. While the speculation and fanfare surrounding Dior reached a popular audience, drawing from the ranks of designers at LVMH belied the reality that this was ultimately still an insider's game.

The story of the House of Dior is a story of the ingénue as much as it is the story of the master. It was the couturier, after all, that plucked a then unknown Yves Saint Laurent from obscurity upon Christian Dior's death in 1957. Fired in 1960, Saint Laurent would go on to establish his own label to become not only the most influential designer of the second half of the 20th century in haute couture, Saint Laurent would revolutionize fashion as a business with a *prêt-à-porter* line in 1966 aptly named *Rive Gauche* or "left bank" for the shop's location opposite the traditional couture atelier's on the right bank and the 1st and 8th arrondisement. Galliano was not just the head designer at Dior whose visionary mind conceived madcap ideas that took shape in elaborate dresses that were sent down a runway in a theatrical fashion show. Galliano was part of the show. Rather than peeking out from the wings with a wave or edging to centre stage for a quick bow, Galliano often strutted down the length of the catwalk at the end of a show to strike a purposeful pose as dramatic as any of the models that preceded him. Galliano further became the show when the videos of his anti-Semitic invectives circulated online and became the news that would be replayed on television and computer screens all over the world the screenshots and the stills from which would be captured and reprinted as pictures on newspapers not unlike the iconic newspaper print dress he made for his eponymous label. Galliano, plucked from obscurity in London and into fame as the head designer of the venerable Parisian House of Dior, was once the ingénue and was now the news. Of the same generation but on the other side of

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the Atlantic, Marc Jacobs was an ingénue given the task of heading the classic American label, Perry Ellis. Making something deemed too radical and otherwise too new, Jacobs was fired only to be named head designer of the respected French malletier Louis Vuitton that had never had a clothing line in 143 years. No longer an ingénue but an established designer, it was not surprising that Jacobs was the leading contender for the position at Dior.

But it will not be Marc Jacobs who will head Dior. In a profile in the January 2012 issue of American Vogue, Jacobs confirmed he was not moving to Dior and reaffirmed his commitment to Vuitton and was especially critical of couture:

> "My greatest challenge is to do something better than we've done the season before. The idea of couture doesn't hold that *thing* for me. It's archaic—in my opinion. I mean, I am really interested in the craftsmanship behind couture. But I can explore all that in ready-to-wear. With couture, one dress each season is photographed by a couple of magazines; there's no advertising; it reaches 20 customers. I don't feel there is anything lacking in what we do. I get to work with these amazing craftsmen. Maybe not the same ateliers that would make a couture dress but, again, we are not in a deficit for working with people who create beautiful things. I am not sure I ever looked at couture as this great opportunity."[20]

Jacobs' puncturing of the rumor that he was moving to Dior only provided new air for fresh speculation as to who would take over the storied house. Soon after, all attention was focused on Raf Simons, the Belgian designer for Jil Sander. In Jacobs' own words "it's just a kind of a circle. It just goes around."[21]

Postscript

On April 9, 2012, Raf Simons was appointed head designer of Christian Dior. Highly influenced by youth culture, music and street wear, Simons had never designed women's wear until he became the head designer of Jil Sander. Dior will be his first foray into haute couture. In the announcement broken in the New York Times, Simons is quoted as saying: "Of course I haven't been in the archive yet, but for me the strongest impact is the first 10 years of Dior and how to link that to the 21st century."[22]

[20] Van Meter 2012.
[21] "Marc Jacobs happy at Louis Vuitton"
[22] Horyn 2012.

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