

An exploration of the Benjaminian ‘Dialectical Image’ through a discussion of the dress in Yinka Shonibare’s 2013 work *Miss Utopia*

Beatrice Hoare

¹ *Miss Utopia*, 2013



“When thought comes to a standstill in a constellation saturated with tension, the dialectical image appears. It is the caesura in the movement of thought. Its position is, of course, not arbitrary. In a word: it is to be sought where the tension between the dialectical contradictories is greatest. In this manner, the object constructed in the materialist representation of history is itself the dialectical image. It is identical with the historical object; it justifies its explosive removal from the continuum of historical happening”.²

¹ Fibreglass mannequin, Dutch wax printed cotton textile, wire, globe and steel baseplate
110 x 70 x 160 cm

Image accessed here: http://www.yinkashonibare.com/artwork/sculpture/?image_id=218

² W. Benjamin, “Convolute N: On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress”, *The Arcades Project*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Howard Eiland, (Bellknap Press: 2002), p.475.

All rights reserved.

The content featured in this publication is the intellectual property of Beatrice Hoare

The Arcades were a key place for the study of urbanism. Benjamin writes of the ‘phantasmagoria of space’ and we picture them as if they are “fairy palaces”.³ The mirrors and glass in the shop window displays that lined the arcades were illuminated by lanterns, and produced a play of light throughout, providing a dream-like scene – or a *dream image*.⁴ The iron-work construction throughout not only represented huge innovations in design and manufacturing, but also created an architectural reversal and a production of the street as interior: ‘a world in miniature’.⁵ The passages became temples of mid 19th Century industry and technology. These aspects of the arcades provided a contradictory quality that Benjamin examined and explored. He was interested in the arcades as both a celebration of the progress of the Enlightenment, yet also a process of dream-like illusions. It is through this that Benjamin developed his theory of the *dialectical image*, which for Pensky, ‘serves as a pinion around which present, past, fantasy and prehistory are collected into one focal point’⁶.

I intend to open up the discussion of the dialectical image to a wider field through the analysis of Yinka Shonibare’s work, and in particular, the garment worn by the figure in *Miss Utopia*. I will examine and extend Benjamin’s concept of the dialectical image with regards to orientalist fabric, and particularly to the Dutch wax resist print that Shonibare used for this garment. With a wide cross-historical and cross-cultural context, I will examine Yinka Shonibare’s appropriation of this fabric to examine his own cultural dialectic - and his consideration of the place of this fabric in the context of colonialist legacy.

³ W. Benjamin, *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical writing*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. and introduction by Peter Demetz, (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), p.156.

⁴ W. Benjamin, *Reflections*, p.157.

⁵ IBID, p.141.

⁶ M. Pensky, “Geheimittel: Advertising and Dialectical Images in Benjamin’s Arcades Project”, in *Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, ed. Beatrice Hanssen, (Continuum: 2006), p.115.

All rights reserved.

The content featured in this publication is the intellectual property of Beatrice Hoare

Yinka Shonibare, a Nigerian-British artist creates work using wax resist fabrics. Commonly referred to as ‘Dutch wax’ fabrics or ‘African Prints’, the fabrics have a complicated set of origins that are usually ignored. A technique of wax-resist dyeing has had a long history of being used to make batik in the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia). During the 19th Century, the Dutch colonizers enlisted men (both slaves and mercenaries) from West Africa to join the army, where they subsequently brought batik fabric back to West Africa. The West Africans developed their own way of making these fabrics, producing designs and patterns that were made to signify significant events and local proverbs. These fabrics could not be sold to batik purists in Indonesia, so were sold by the Dutch back to West Africa. These fabrics were made into clothes to be worn by West African women, and were regarded with a high status⁷. This is an example of what is termed *self-orientalising* by A. Leshkovich and C. Jones in “What Happens When Asian Chic Becomes Chic in Asia?”. They suggest that ‘self-orientalising can be a privilege that enhances the status of those who employ it by signaling their familiarity with global discourses’⁸. Thus, it is interesting, that this fabric became a symbol of Nationalist revival in the wake of political independence in Africa: ‘a sign of a new continent, of pride and difference’⁹ and in 1970’s became central to the iconography of the Black Power movement in Britain and the United States.

⁷ See J. Felsenthal, “The Curious History of “Tribal” Prints” in Slate, (March 2012) [online] http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/design/2012/03/african_fabric_where_do_tribal_prints_really_come_from_.html

⁸ A. Leshkovich and C. Jones, “What Happens When Asian Chic Becomes Chic in Asia?”, *Fashion Theory*, Vol. 7, Issue 3/4, p.285.

⁹ O. Oguibe, “Finding a Place: Nigerian Artists in the Contemporary Art World”, *Art Journal*, Vol. 58, No. 2 (Summer, 1999) p.38.

All rights reserved.

The content featured in this publication is the intellectual property of Beatrice Hoare

Miss Utopia (2013) is an artwork that contains within in a garment of rich cultural and historical interest, whilst peddling huge dialectical tensions.



10

In this detailed view of the dress we are subject to the garments bold-ness, in both its fabric and its structure and detail. The frivolity of its sleeve and cuff are reminiscent of certain aspects of the Baroque/Rococo period spanning 1650-1800 which Shonibare takes much of his inspiration for the clothing prominent in his artworks. Interestingly, however, whilst the puffed sleeves and cuff and the beading do echo the extravagance that was a trademark for the Rococo style, the lack of corset and the lack of full skirt suggest a nod towards the *Chemise à la Reine*, which pioneered by Marie Antoinette, and came into prominence in the latter half of the 18th Century.

¹⁰ Cropped close up of image cited in fig. 1.



11



12

The Chemise à la Reine, was a shocking garment at the time, as the thin, light muslin fabric and lack of corset allowed for the female form to be shown. The choice of materials to form the Chemise à la Reine, allowed for both a frivolity and decadence, yet a move away from the heavy, detailed fabric that gave the Rococo period its extravagance. Interestingly, it is indeed the choice of material that lends the dress in *Miss Utopia* its tension and interest. The Dutch wax resist material shocks the dress into the 21st Century of its making, whilst spanning the centuries of history and culture that have informed it.

In an interview for *Das Kunstmagazin* in which Shonibare discusses his 2014 exhibition, *Making Eden* – Shonibare explores some important aspects of the piece, and the garment specifically:

¹¹ Portrait of Henrietta Maria by Sir Anthony van Dyck, oil on canvas, (circa 1632-1635) 43 in. x 32 1/2 in.

¹² Marie Antoinette in a Chemise a la Reine [online] accessed here:

<https://historyofeuropeanfashion.wordpress.com/2012/05/14/rococo-ruh-koh-koh-florid-or-excessively-elaborate/>

All rights reserved.

The content featured in this publication is the intellectual property of Beatrice Hoare

HF - Normally, Adam and Eve are naked - in your work wear exquisite clothes in the fashion of European 18th Century. They are made traditional African fabrics with batik patterns, however, were made in the Netherlands and then shipped to the UK. Why?

YS - It's just a game with stereotypes, because these stereotypes do I remove the heads. I do my work in the West, so I need my audience here, to communicate. For that I need the collective memory and collective symbols that can be recognized by the majority of the people. My work, *Miss Utopia* (2013), for example, welcomes the viewer as they enter into the lower gallery area. She is holding a large bouquet of flowers against each made from African batik fabric. As a symbol of peace, it appears as the figurehead of the newly founded "Eden".

HF - Why is *Miss Utopia* a female and not a male figure?

YS - Because I wanted to make a fabulous dress ... In this wonderful dress she seems to be all incoming an attractive and sweet promise, as in Thomas More's famous book "Utopia", released in 1516... The use of a globe with planetary alignments instead of her head exudes an almost dreamlike feeling of endless possibility.

HF - Why do you always refer to the fashion of the Baroque and Rococo - why not the Empire style of the Napoleonic era of the 19th Century?

YS - I am attracted to these styles as an artist ... I exist in the field of decadence, and the Rococo is decadence par excellence. It is a reflection of the aristocratic society of

excess, the accumulation of wealth, power and time as a result of oppression. I am equally drawn from the aristocracy, as I also want to kill the aristocracy.¹³

During the 17th to the early 19th Centuries, colonialism saw a wealth of exchange between Western traders and the Eastern continents, of which the most prominent goods were textiles and apparel. A product of colonialism and a result of a desire for the exoticism the East promised, the flow of goods played an ‘essential role in determining modern art and design’¹⁴, and equally, fashion. Edward Said in his introduction to *Orientalism*, stated that ‘the Orient was almost a European invention ... a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes’¹⁵, and ‘taking the late eighteenth century as a roughly defined starting point, Orientalism can be discussed and analysed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient’¹⁶.

As explored by the MoMA exhibition in 2000, *Orientalism...*, ‘The power of costume is in its capacity to be absorbed’¹⁷. We can look at the legacy of this cultural exchange of textiles and fashion as a dialectical inquiry: ‘Orientalism is a fabrication of the West... The early discoverers and the traders sought a land never to inhabit, ever to see as different – a perfect “other”, warranting a Western supremacy and segregation, and vested with exotic mystery’¹⁸. The Western idea of the East that was transported back to the Empires via objects and textiles, was seen as an enchantment; an alluring, exotic myth, that was received in the West as a fresh

¹³ Interview with Yinka Shonibare by Das Kunstmagazin: Heike Fuhlbrugge, “DIE PREKÄRE NATUR DER REVOLUTION”, *Das Kunstmagazin*, 11/03/2014, trans. B. Hoare [online] accessed here: http://www.art-magazin.de/kunst/70007/yinka_shonibare_interview

¹⁴ Koda, Harold and Martin. "Orientalism: Visions of the East in Western Dress". In *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–.

http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/orie/hd_orie.htm (October 2004) p.10.

¹⁵ E. Said, “Introduction” in *Orientalism*, Penguin Books, London, 2003, p.1.

¹⁶ Said, p.3.

¹⁷ Koda, Harold and Martin, p.10.

¹⁸ Koda, Harold and Martin, p.9.

new idea that could be absorbed and appropriated. ‘Orientalism is not a picture of the East. It represents a longing, option and a faraway perfection. It is, like Utopia, a picture everywhere and nowhere’¹⁹.

In Post-structuralist thought, it is precisely this separation of the results of cultural exchange that has done the most damage. In “Primitivism”, a response to the 1985 exhibition at MoMA, *‘Primitivism’ in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, James Hatch and Joe Weixlmann refer to Hegel’s tracings of colonial souvenirs. ‘These totems, the masks, these powerful, holy objects directly maintained and sustained the tribe’s existence... But as generations pass, the efficacy of the mask and the totem wanes... finally in our museums... they sit side-by-side, *objets d’art*, all of them... In their “borrowings”... Western takers and makers of art have attempted to transform their tribal sources into *objects* indeed’²⁰. In *Primitivism and Postcolonialism*, Jean-Loup Amselle writes that up until 1980’s ‘primitivism was seen as a positive phenomenon capable of breathing new life into Western art, then deemed to have become decadent’²¹. Referring to the primitive-art inspired works of Picasso, Derain, Picabia, Matisse et al, Amselle suggests that despite early theories that ‘the appropriation or reinterpretation of “exotic” objects by Fauvist and Cubist artists might have been an indication that African and Oceanic “primitive” arts had won recognition, and that European awareness of and openness to others had increased...non-Western artists and theoreticians now reject this interpretation’²². While ‘their goal was to put “exotic” sculptures on an equal footing with early 20th Century European Art’, this reappropriation and equivalence actually amounts to a forced regression for African, Oceanic and Asian peoples,

¹⁹ Koda, Harold and Martin, p.13.

²⁰ J. Hatch and J. Weixlmann, “Primitivism” in *Black American Literature Forum*, Vol.19, No. 1, Contemporary Black Artists Issue, (Spring, 1985) p.51.

²¹ J. Amselle, “Primitivism and Postcolonialism in the Arts” trans. N. Mellott and J. Van Dam, in *MLN*, Vol. 118, No. 4, (Sept. 2003) p.974.

²² J. Amselle. p.974.

back into a “savage past”. ‘To establish congruencies’, Amselle argues, is to ‘dehistoricise the Third World’²³.

It is argued that Benjamin’s “phantasmagoria” (Reflections 156) is akin to a dehistoricising mythos²⁴. In the *Arcades Project*, Benjamin engages with Marxist ideas around consumption. Within Marxist thought, the process of consumption is critiqued: when an object is given a monetary value, it becomes divorced from any value that has resulted from the labour that went into its production. It is no longer an object made, but now a commodity to be consumed. When we lose sight of the labour that goes into the making, we consequently lose sight of something very important for the critique of Capitalism. This empowers the commodity with a mystifying quality that suppresses us. This is the “phantasmagoria” of consumerism as explored by Benjamin. For Benjamin, the commodity becomes a “wish image”, which contains and exudes a memory of our Utopian longing for a different life. Benjamin looks to Marx when deciding that Capitalism what prevents us from finding that fulfillment. While, the commodity contains within itself, the opportunity for de-mystification, it is hindered by Capitalism that will not let that happen. I attempt, here, to draw parallels between the mystifying commodity, whose power is obstructed by an overarching structure defined by the ruling classes – and the legacies of colonialist exchange, assumed and appropriated by a larger structure to be redefined and ultimately destroyed.

With reference to Marx’s eleventh thesis, Benjamin initiates the *Arcades Project* as a critique of the commodity as a task of anti-capitalist struggle. “Philosophers have hitherto only

²³ J. Amselle, p.975.

²⁴ C. Bartolovich, “Figuring the (in)visible in an Imperial Weltstadt: The Case of Benjamin’s Moor”, *Cultural Critique*, No. 52, Everyday Life (Autumn, 2002), p.169.

interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it”²⁵. According to Marx, the point of philosophy is not simply to understand the world, but now to change it. This thesis calls for a shift, not simply in the way we perceive the world, but how we act within it. Benjamin can be seen to be imagining alternative possibilities to Capitalism, by searching for the Utopian possibilities in unlikely sites²⁶. This process is referred to as a quest for “unintentional truth”²⁷.

It is this, I argue, that can be seen in the dress of the 2013 work, *Miss Utopia*. The dress is a bright, bold use of Dutch wax-resist fabric, fashioned to resemble historical European costume. Shonibare combines unlikely/impossible combinations of historical and cultural references to create a dialogue, allowing for a climate in which cultural overlap can be objectively viewed²⁸. He examines closely aspects of his personal cultural mélange²⁹ and allows the viewer to ‘reconsider the power-play between two cultures in the midst of a political or social dialogue’³⁰. Shonibare ascertains that the textiles his works display represent a far-flung geography³¹, referencing here not only his own cultural duality, but also the history of the fabric he uses. ‘A colonial invention, Dutch wax fabric offers itself as both a fake and yet “authentic” sign of Africanness, and Shonibare’s use of it in his paintings and sculptures accentuates a politics of (in)authenticity by simultaneously presenting both the ideal of an “authentic” identity and identity as a “fabrication.”’³². Interestingly, K. Mercer observes that ‘English critics have come away from Shonibare’s work feeling that it is not

²⁵ K, Marx, “Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach”, *Marx/Engels Selected Works*, Volume One, Progress Publishers, Moscow, USSR, 1969, p. 13 – 15.

²⁶ Bartolovich, p.197.

²⁷ S. Buck-Morss, *Origin of Negative Dialectics*, New York: Free Press, 1977, p.77-81.

²⁸ C. Okhio, “Yinka Shonibare. A Critique...”, By Such & Such, *ART*, November 26, 2013. [online]

<http://bysuchandsuch.com/2013/11/yinka-shonibare-a-critique/>

²⁹ C. Bartolovich, p.167.

³⁰ C. Okhio, November 26, 2013.

³¹ Bartolovich, p.167.

³² A, Downey, “Yinka Shonibare,” *BOMB – Artists in Conversation*, No. 93, (Fall, 2005)

quite African enough'³³. In an interview with Anthony Downey, Shonibare suggested that 'there is no such thing as a natural signifier, that the signifier is always constructed. In other words, that what you represent things with is a form of mythology'³⁴. It can be seen, therefore, that Shonibare's cultural farragos create their own visual signifier to redistribute problematically dispersed power.

Shonibare refers to his amalgamations of cultural references which are completely divorced from the historical context: 'As a black person in this context, I can create fantasies of empowerment in relation to white society, even if historically that equilibrium or equality really hasn't arrived yet'³⁵. Scenarios are created using visual aspects of this cultural assemblage 'without placing them on the rung they have historically occupied in the global hierarchy'³⁶.

Shonibare explains that by creating sculptures using these clashing cultural and historical references, he collapses the concept of a 'European dichotomy against an African one'³⁷. Bartolovich suggests however, that as a critique of authenticity and as an evocation of identity crises in a globalizing world, it is possible to see his vibrant fashion statements and satiric interiors as exposing a political-economic "unintentional truth" in which a "dichotomy" is far more evident: the reliance of European wealth on imperial control of global trade,

³³ K. Mercer, "Art that is Tribal in Inverted Commas", *Frieze*, no.25 (1995).

³⁴ Yinka Shonibare in conversation with Anthony Downey in "Yinka Shonibare," BOMB – Artists in Conversation, No. 93, (Fall, 2005)

³⁵ Yinka Shonibare in conversation with Anthony Downey in "Yinka Shonibare," BOMB – Artists in Conversation, No. 93, (Fall, 2005)

³⁶ ³⁶ Okhio, November 26, 2013.

³⁷ Bartolovich, p.168.

All rights reserved.

The content featured in this publication is the intellectual property of Beatrice Hoare

which hugely benefitted Europeans in the colonial period, and continues to underwrite global inequalities today.³⁸

³⁸ Bartolovich, p.168.

All rights reserved.

The content featured in this publication is the intellectual property of Beatrice Hoare

Bibliography

Benjamin, W, “Convolute N: On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress”, *The Arcades Project*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Howard Eiland, (Bellknap Press: 2002).

Leshkovich, A. and Jones, C. (2007) “What Happens When Asian Chic Becomes Chic in Asia?”, *Fashion Theory*, Vol. 7, Issue ¾.

Oguibe, O. “Finding a Place: Nigerian Artists in the Contemporary Art World”, *Art Journal*, Vol. 58, No. 2 (Summer, 1999).

Koda, Harold and Martin. "Orientalism: Visions of the East in Western Dress". In *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–). (October, 2004).

Said, E. “Introduction” in *Orientalism*, (Penguin Books: London, 2003).

Hatch, J. and Weixlmann, J. “Primitivism” in *Black American Literature Forum*, Vol.19, No. 1, Contemporary Black Artists Issue, (Spring, 1985).

Amselle, J. “Primitivism and Postcolonialism in the Arts” in *MLN*, Vol. 118, No. 4 French Issue, trans. N. Mellott and J. Van Dam, (Sept. 2003).

Bartolovich, C. “Figuring the (in)visible in an Imperial Weltstadt: The Case of Benjamin’s Moor”, *Cultural Critique*, No. 52, Everyday Life (Autumn, 2002).

Marx, K. “Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach”, *Marx/Engels Selected Works*, Volume One, (Progress Publishers: Moscow, USSR, 1969).

Buck-Morss, S. *Origin of Negative Dialectics*, (New York: Free Press, 1977).

Downey, A. “Yinka Shonibare,” *BOMB – Artists in Conversation*, No. 93, (Fall, 2005)

Mercer, K. “Art that is Tribal in Inverted Commas”, *Frieze*, no.25 (1995).

Online resources:

Fuhlbrugge, H. Interview with Yinka Shonibare by Das Kunstmagazin: “DIE PREKÄRE NATUR DER REVOLUTION”, *Das Kunstmagazin*, 11/03/2014.
http://www.art-magazin.de/kunst/70007/yinka_shonibare_interview

Felsenthal, J. “The Curious History of “Tribal” Prints” in *Slate*, (March 2012)
http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/design/2012/03/african_fabric_where_do_tribal_prints_really_come_from_.html

Okhio, C. “Yinka Shonibare. A Critique...”, By Such & Such, *ART*, November 26, 2013.
<http://bysuchandsuch.com/2013/11/yinka-shonibare-a-critique/>