

# Gazing on invisible men: Introducing the gallery gaze to establish that (in)visibility is in the eye of the beholder at Westminster Menswear Archive

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## Abstract

The Westminster Menswear Archive, housed at the University of Westminster held an exhibition in 2019 entitled 'Invisible Men'. The purpose of this show was to “shine a light” on men, or more accurately menswear which had been hitherto neglected by scholarship and exhibitions featuring dress (Groves and Sprecher, 2019). This article draws on research conducted at this exhibition to ask anthropological questions as to the nature of menswear both in the gallery space and beyond. Fundamentally this will question the invisible nature of menswear and whether such invisibility really exists. In order to accomplish this, this article will suggest a new theory of the gaze that exists in the gallery or exhibition space – the gallery gaze – and use it to provoke analysis of the ethnographic material presented. This article acknowledges a distinction between intellectual, semiotic and symbolic invisibility but suggests a different approach, arguing for an (in)visibility of progressive degrees.

## Keywords

menswear, gaze, fashion, museum anthropology, anthropology of clothing and adornment

Arriving at the University of Westminster in the heart of busy London, one would be forgiven for not knowing this exhibition was occurring. Bar a single large poster tucked inside the atrium of the main university building, emblazoned with the image of a metallic silver firefighter’s jacket, the signage was inconspicuous and minimalistic. Appropriate, perhaps, for an exhibition entitled Invisible Men, although one can only wonder how

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many passing feet walk straight past this fantastic exhibition without knowing it even exists.

Having enquired for directions I made my way along Marylebone road where the University is situated until I came to a large set of grey-metal gates, simple and unadorned, behind which a set of industrial metal stairs descended out of sight. At the top of these stairs, perched on a preposterously low three legged stool and buried in a notebook, was a young woman, wrapped up against the November chill in the standard uniform of many a postgraduate student – oversized coat and bright woolly hat. She looked up from her book, checked where I was heading and gestured down the stairs.

The stairs wound down from street level, my boots echoing with clangs and booms as the metal responded to my footfall. Two flights later I emerged into a service area, open-air but dark and still, insulated from the throb of busses and taxis that rumble along the Marylebone road above, by the cold ground now between us. I moved forward into the gloom of a long concrete passage, akin to an underpass, but larger and lonelier. I had the acute sensation that I should not be there – the kind of damp out of bounds service area where something bad always happens in Hollywood films of the 1980s. Then, quite suddenly, a pair of long vermilion velvet curtains appeared around a corner with a chink of light between them. Unsure whether this was the exhibition or some form of neo-hipster speakeasy, I waived, then pushed through the heavy drapes to be greeted with a sign, identical to the one in the University atrium, but this time much larger. A twelve foot silver-clad fire-fighter looked down at me, expression hidden behind a mirrored visor, foreboding, recognisable and futuristic in equal measure. I had arrived.

## **Introduction**

This article introduces a new theory for how we can consider objects within an exhibition space and the gaze which falls upon them. This gallery gaze, as I have termed it, draws on a Lacanian understanding of gaze (Lacan, 2918: 67-105), but also builds on the work of Merleau-Ponty (1962: 93), specifically the notion of an agential relationship between object and viewer that is two-way. However, I assert that beyond this reciprocal relationship there is also an inherent inequality to this two-way gaze, an issue that will be discussed throughout this article and one that echoes new materialist theory and the notion that matter performs - or in the words of Barad (2007: 151) matter “is...a doing”. Essentially, the gallery gaze acknowledges that the gallery space itself encourages a specific kind of looking. This look is distinct to each looker and each object, resulting in potentially infinite unique sites of regard within the space (both spatially and temporally) constituted by reciprocated gazes between each object and attendee. The cumulative nature of these gazes is ‘the’ gallery gaze, but each individual reciprocated gaze within the space is ‘a’ gallery gaze. In much the same way that Mulvey’s (1985) male gaze describes male viewing of the fetishized female through a specific lens, the gallery gaze describes the lens of attendee viewing exhibit, and the returned regard of that exhibit. The object on display is granted the power to perform and agentially regard, not simply by their display in the space, as a product of their

curator, but by the Baudrillardian (1981) sign-value inherent to this elevation. Whether the gallery gaze can exist beyond the confines of the gallery is not yet clear and requires further work. However this investigation will bear on the definitions given to the terms gallery, attendee, object and curator in equal measure. For the purposes of this article the first three definitions will be given over to their common sense vernacular rendering, whilst the curator will simply be the figure who has decided what items will be displayed, and how they will be displayed using their expert knowledge.

There have been a number of well-conceived exhibitions held over recent years celebrating clothing, fashion and the intersection between design as a creative art and an academic reading of dress as political, sociological and gendered. The most prominent of these in the United Kingdom include Jean Paul Gaultier: From the Sidewalk to the Catwalk held at the Barbican in 2014 and the hugely popular Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty held at the Victoria and Albert museum (hereafter V&A) in 2015 (see Bolton, 2011). In addition to these iconic exhibitions, both held in London and both of which I attended as part of my doctoral research, there have been numerous other exhibitions, primarily held at the V&A. These include: the 2014 Club to Catwalk: London Fashion in the 1980s (Stanfill, 2013); the 2013 David Bowie is show (Broackes and Marsh, 2013); the 2011 Yohji Yamamoto retrospective (Salazar, 2011); and the 2004 Vivienne Westwood retrospective (Wilcox, 2004) amongst others. However, the accusation often levelled at shows such as these is that they are predominantly about womenswear, either sidelining or dismissing altogether the role of menswear in fashion. Indeed Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty had no examples from McQueen's menswear collections despite the fact he often showed menswear and womenswear alongside each other on his early catwalks, and was apprenticed at the Savile Row tailor Anderson and Sheppard and later Gieves and Hawkes. This intentional disconnect between a designer's corpus of work and the objects that are chosen for display in galleries, is heightened by the persistence of particular classes of menswear which are shown, or made visible, within gallery spaces. These tend to include the exuberant and outlandish, from the stage costumes of David Bowie, to corsets worn by nineteenth century dandies (see Lamotte 2015), and frequently examples from the most flamboyant of London's tailors – particularly the garments they were producing in the swinging 60s (see Aquilina Ross, 2011).

These are the sentiments of the exhibition *Invisible Men*. Indeed, printed large on the wall of the exhibition space is a manifesto of sorts, reproduced in the exhibition catalogue:

“Invisible Men displays over 180 garments drawn from the Westminster Menswear Archive. It covers the last 120 years of mostly British menswear organised into twelve thematic sections. It explores the design language of menswear by presenting designer garments alongside military, functional and utilitarian outfits.

The replication of archetypal functional garments intended for specific industrial, technical or military use dominates menswear design. The exhibition illustrates how designers have disrupted these conventions through minimal, yet significant modifications to produce outcomes that both replicate and subvert their source material. The endless reproduction,

appropriation and interpretation has meant that the original meaning and function has faded through each reiteration.

Through this approach, the language of menswear has developed an almost fetishistic appreciation of the working man in all his heroic iterations. Designs constantly reference the clothing of seafarers soldiers, athletes, firefighters, road workers, and explorers.

This design strategy has largely allowed men and what they wear to avoid scrutiny. These garments have remained largely invisible within fashion exhibitions in favour of presenting menswear primarily as the story of the dandy or the peacock male.

This exhibition aims to shine a light on these invisible men” (Groves and Sprecher, 2019).

Anthropologically this notion of ‘invisible men’ is more complex than the above quotation – emblazoned on the gallery wall – would initially lead one to suspect. Invisibility is a nuanced term and one that is ripe for contest, especially when many of the clothes on display in this exhibition come from a British past that is even more patriarchal than it is now. How then, can the clothing of highly visible and powerful men be invisible? Are they somehow disconnected from the position and prestige of the wearer? Now, not all the clothes on display can be contested in this way, and some particularly outlandish items made me wonder whether there was any context in which they could be considered anything other than highly visible – an ankle length (and heavily embroidered) gold lamé kaftan by Mr Fish comes vividly to mind (see figure 1). Yet despite the more dandyfied items, much of this exhibition evoked an invisibility for a variety of interwoven reasons which sit at the heart of British menswear. So perhaps, tautological though it may seem, the garments on display for the public to view really are a complex combination of intellectually, semiotically and symbolically invisible. Having said this, it is worth noting that in line with Triggs (1992) and McCauley Bowstead (2018), the increasing consideration of the male body by the worlds of fashion and media have disrupted hegemonic ways of looking. Ironically, it may be that this exhibition on Invisible Men serves to highlight the disruption, ultimately making visible that which was formerly not – something of a salvage paradox.

This article will employ the content of this exhibition and ethnographic fieldwork within the exhibition as a hybrid of sorts – a mix of archival and ethnographic material – to suggest precisely this. Arguing that much everyday western menswear remains largely invisible (see also Cuenca, 2013), not simply because we are more concerned with peacocks and dandies or even the intricacies of womenswear, as Cole (2000: 1-9) suggests (see also Hansen 2004: 369-370), but because of the fundamental make up of our gendered society, in which women’s clothing is held as an object of fetishistic interest against the supposed drab cousin of menswear. The ‘we’ in the previous sentence is a rather broad term, but within it, I refer specifically to academic scholars and published scholarship on dress and fashion from a broad range of disciplines (see Nixon, 1996; Edwards, 2016; McCauley Bowstead, 2018), as well as those conceiving of, and organising the kinds of exhibitions held at the V&A discussed above. Anthropology is not immune from such critique either, as with the notable exception of Miller and Woodward (2012; see also Woodward 2011), the majority of anthropological scholarship



**Figure 1.** Gold Lamé Kaftan by Mr Fish (exhibited at Invisible Men at Westminster Menswear Archive).

on dress is concerned with both women and the non-west (see Luvaas and Eicher, 2019). Indeed, even when men are the focus of anthropological interest as in the case of Friedman (1994) the geographical focus tends towards the exotic. The term exotic is carefully chosen here, and specifically anthropological, conveying a sense of other, drawing

on Said's (1978) orientalism. This disparity is all the more acute when we consider, as this exhibition primarily does, the niche of British menswear. Offering commentary on not only what it means to be a dressed man, but what it means to be a British dressed man. This sits within a wider corpus of anthropology of the United Kingdom (see Reed, 2002; Rapport, 2002; Miller and Parrott, 2009), but also draws understanding from a historical lived experience of wearers and garments alike, communicated to each new generation through a complex melange of old photographs, television broadcasts, musician's stage wear and vintage formalwear rediscovered and appropriated (or misappropriated) by each generation in new ways (there are echoes of Toren and Pauwels, 2015: 3 work here).

Exhibitions such as this intersect with these historical life cycles of certain garments – both with garments themselves being repurposed, and designs recycled – to apply a different kind of gaze to the cloth. This is a gaze borne out of the exhibition space, tantamount to an assertion that the artefact one is gazing on has, through the act of being placed (literally) on a pedestal been transmogrified into something less everyday, more special, and approaching the label of art (there are links here to Putnam's 2001 work, particularly the introduction and chapter 1). Post-Duchamp it is often argued that once an object is placed within the confines of a gallery it becomes art, yet this is in contrast to a more commonplace definition used in the vernacular denoting aesthetic value. Krause-Jensen (2013: 165) comments on this idea with objects that have been manufactured by the audio and electronics brand Bang & Olufsen and later "incorporated into art museums", but he would tell us that "they are not works of art". This is not due to a lack of aesthetic merit, but rather a question of intentionality – they are the product of a designer, and not of an artist Krause-Jensen (2013: 165) explains.

While this question of the creator's intentionality may be more clear cut when we are dealing with hi-fi equipment and audio-visual components, which are manufactured in a factory, a different lens needs to be applied when the question of clothing is approached. Some of the items on display were mass produced, others produced by hand by master craftsman, and others intentionally conceived as pieces of runway 'art'. There were even pieces such as a biker jacket (see figure 2), heavily studded and covered in badges that displayed a collage of the owner's life, a totally unique item displaying history and creativity – not to mention patina (see Csaba and Ger, 2013) – which would be a piece of art to the right collector. Art then, in this context may be less about the intention of the maker and more about the gaze which falls on the object, a gaze which is context dependent and as individualistic as these objects themselves. In this case (in)visibility is in the eye of the beholder. To put it simply aesthetic merit, and the label of art, is a complex interweaving of space, place and context, but the ultimate judgement comes not from any of these but from the scopophilic gaze which falls upon the object (see Mulvey 1985).

### *The Gazes within the Gallery*

This notion of the eye of the beholder, is quite simply a synonym for the phenomenological nature of the gaze. In essence, the concept is that what we see – and the socio-cultural apparatus of this seeing – are constituted through context and experienced



**Figure 2.** Vintage Leather Biker Jacket (exhibited at Invisible Men at Westminster Menswear Archive).

phenomenologically. This is the key tenet around which this article is based, and as such the various looks and gazes which occur in the gallery space will be interrogated. This will allow for an engagement with the wider narrative of invisibility and the ‘invisible man’, by questioning what the beholder’s eye can see, and what is invisible. Such a

question naturally rests on who this beholder is and in what context they are gazing. For example, one could easily walk past a piece of graffiti art on the street without giving it a second glance. However, if this graffiti was by an (in)famous street artist such as Banksy, one might later find it being displayed in a gallery. The ways of seeing in both of these contexts is very different and unless you were well-equipped enough to know what you were looking at on the street, the experience of looking would be different. This is not to disavow any intrinsic aesthetic merit a painting, garment or object may have, but merely serves to highlight the overwhelming importance of context.

Similar quandaries could be levelled at forged paintings or fake designer clothing (see Crăciun, 2009, 2012; see also Pipyrrou, 2014), where interpretation of the realness (and therefore visibility) of such items can be context dependent. Furthermore, even legitimate designer clothes can be invisible. Miller and Woodward (2012: 52-55) wrestle with this issue, trying to unpack the reason for choosing a particular brand of denim when many will not notice as they walk past you on the street. This is the basis for their notion of the “postsemiotic garment”, a garment which is so ubiquitous that it loses symbolic capital and becomes effectively invisible (Miller and Woodward, 2012: 89). Yet even those garments which could be termed postsemiotic, or are worn by ‘invisible men’, find that their own notion of invisibility changes once they have entered the context of the gallery, and morphed from garment to exhibit.

The curated nature of such a displayed collection as one finds at an exhibition immediately implies that the items have been specifically chosen for display. Such an action already predisposes the gaze that falls upon such objects as a privileged one. There is an intrinsic suggestion that the pieces on display have been chosen from a vast number of possible objects, by a curator with a greater knowledge base than the average attendee. This mythic curator figure (in an anthropological sense) has the power to raise these objects onto both a literal and figurative pedestal and to both empower and imbue them with a rarefied nature. Consequently the context of the gallery has the ability to alter the perception of that on display; raising an object that, outside the gallery may have been thought of as nice or pretty, to the level of beauty or art. Perhaps the difference here is that the former evokes a mere aesthetic judgement and the latter something more fundamentally emotive. The question remains whether such an emotive response can even be instinctive or whether it will always be coloured and shaped by the context within which it is situated.

Irrespective of such questions, the gallery space is further complicated by individuals visiting the exhibition who may be experts in the field. Here, notions of connoisseurship are important as, following Fillitz and Saris (2013: 1; see also Bluteau, 2022: 45–56), it is a useful way of engaging with notions of authenticity, value and the even less tangible qualities associated with the kind of objects deemed to be of a sufficient standard to be displayed in the gallery space. This disparity between the different kinds of attendee (the connoisseur and the lay visitor) adds to the complexity with which the gaze that occurs within the gallery space needs to be analysed, and the manner in which the objects on display can be conceptualised as (in)visible.

The gallery gaze is beholden on the contention that the gallery itself as a space provokes a specific kind of regard, unique between each attendee and exhibit. Given the number of gazes and forms of gaze in this space, there will in effect be an overlapping



series of individual gazes. This leads to the gallery gaze, a complex series of overlaid and overlapping gazes, rendered in four-dimensional space.

At the University of Westminster, the exhibition venue itself was set in a large room reminiscent of brutalism, hewn from poured concrete with an enormously high ceiling, somewhere between a warehouse for keeping giraffes and the bowels of a container ship. Yet while on first inspection I expected the room to be damp, drafty and cold it was surprisingly pleasant, well lit and warm, managing to feel both like a traditional gallery space and as though you were there to see something forbidden, hidden and illicit. Whether this was an intentional choice to heighten this sense of making the invisible visible through such an evocative location I am not sure, but it certainly had this effect on myself. There was even a subtle, evocative and strange hint to the deliberate architectures of ritual, and I found myself likening the descent through the concrete tunnel and between the velvet curtains to the initiation wells found at the *Quinta da Regaleira* in Portugal – supposedly the site of an arcane initiation ritual where willing initiates were brought underground from darkness to light, into an inner sanctum where the invisible suddenly became visible.

As I stood on the balcony at the entrance to the exhibition, just through the long velvet curtains, a large brightly-lit single room stretched out before me; clothes arranged in neat rows, on smart mannequins standing silently to attention – I almost felt as if I would be expected to give a rousing speech to the massed hordes of neat military men standing patiently below. These mannequins were grouped into rows, themed into various categories: capes; overalls; black jacket; proletariat; camouflage; armour; flight jacket; urban protection; sportswear; technology; Alexander McQueen; ceremonial. These categories each presented a particular facet of invisibility, but certain items could easily have been moved into other rows. The notion of uniform was a constant that bound many of the pieces together, from traditional military finery such as a scarlet and heavily embellished Grenadier Guard's drummer tunic (see figure 3), or a Life Guards officer's mess uniform (see figure 4), through to flight suits, a Post Office duffle coat, some police body armour and a heavily camouflaged military sniper's ghillie suit – a one piece over-suit worn by snipers and heavily camouflaged with strips of fabric to disrupt the shape of the wearer and help them blend into the landscape. Doubtless excellent for its intended use but out of context on a gallery mannequin it looked more like an extra's costume from an early Science Fiction film.

## *Uniform*

All these items, and there were many more, fit into a classification of uniform – a form of dress worn by members of the same organisation or group either by choice or through force to foster or enforce a shared identity. The notion of uniform has been crucial to how men in the UK dress for at least the past 100 years (although uniforms have been around for far longer in military and non-military settings), with cultural notions of masculinity (and indeed hegemonic masculinity – see Connell 2005), appropriateness and rebellion all performed and construed through a relationship with uniform. Items as disparate as lounge suits and bomber jackets through to the stage costumes of glam rock stars and new romantic musicians have all taken cues from military garments (see Breward,



**Figure 3.** Grenadier Guard's Drummer Tunic (exhibited at Invisible Men at Westminster Menswear Archive).

2016; see also Craik, 2003; Ugolini, 2010). There is an element here of belonging, whether this is to a particular group, regiment, country or ideal. Furthermore, de-individualisation is an intrinsic part of the purpose of military uniform, to encourage soldiers to act as a single unit and disavow self-preservation, or align oneself with a



**Figure 4.** Life Guards Officer's Mess Uniform (exhibited at Invisible Men at Westminster Menswear Archive).

partisan group. However, uniform has also come to be a much-established comedic trope within the long established heritage of British comedy. Sitcoms such as *Dads Army* and *The Thin Blue Line* use military and police uniforms respectively to gently subvert the ideas that these garments represent, highlighting the juxtaposition between the conceptual

construct of a uniformed body of people, and the reality of uniforms being worn by a group made up of individuals. The use of the term body here is intentionally Foucauldian and refers to a body in the same manner Foucault conceptualises the king's body – a singular construct potentially made up of many physical bodies (Foucault, 1980: 55; Bluteau, 2022: 142–144, see also Foucault's, 1995: 135–136 discussion of the Soldier's body).

Uniform should at least in part disavow the notion of individual, indeed soldiers in the British Army are instructed to salute the uniform – the commission – not the wearer. This imbues such clothing with enormous power, which is further exemplified by the severe legal implications within UK law of impersonating a police officer (Police Act, 1996). Yet it appeals to the satirical taste of much British and Irish humour to subvert these empowered garments for effect, demonstrably evident in television sitcoms such as *Father Ted* portraying Catholic Priests in Ireland, through to the stand-up comedian Julian Clary donning a sequinned and skin tight police uniform during one of his routines as *The Joan Collins Fan Club* on the popular Channel 4 television programme *Friday Night Live* on 8<sup>th</sup> April 1988 (Available on YouTube; see also Clary, 2005: 206–207). Sartre might tell us that Clary's costume is a politicised action whose comedic value stems from performing an appearance which is suggestive of acting beyond one's station (Sartre, 1993: 167). However, uniform is not only emblematic of rank, station or position, but it is also laden with symbols, both giving credence to the hegemonic order within which it is situated, but also projecting certain less formally situated performativities which are constituted symbolically. So while Clary's sketch was purposely aimed at James Anderton – the then Chief Constable of Greater Manchester, notorious for his policy against homosexuals – the subversion of the symbols of the policeman offer a weaponised larder for the subversive which can be plundered to either undermine the conventional reading of such symbols, or to affirm such readings in a radically different context.

Context then is key, for it is context within which the gaze is enacted and performed. Dilley's (1999) work on the context within which symbols can be read and understood will attest to this, but symbols representing power, aggression and the ability to assert such a will are not confined to the stage or the parade ground. Militaristic symbols such as badges of rank, epaulettes and officers peaked caps, have long permeated the dress of subcultures and are found in the rubber and fetish scene centring, in London, around clubs such as *Torture Garden*. Here symbols of power, ranging from hegemonic manifestations to literal restraint, metamorphose into the basis for characters and the costume of various performed identities, granted a stage within the safe-space of these clubs – while still taking cues from a historically located concrete jungle of cloth-bound symbols. Indeed, within the context of such clubs even outlandish outfits will be granted a degree of invisibility – analogous to Miller and Woodward's (2012: 102) notion of “the struggle for ordinary” – for if someone was to be granted entry wearing typical streetwear their outfit would be so far from the new normal, or ordinary (defined through context), that even the most postsemiotic outfit would suddenly become hyper-visible. This is one end of the spectrum, and whilst there were no articles of latex clubwear in this exhibition there were examples of clubwear from Jean-Paul Gaultier and articles of rubberised wet weather clothing, so there is a sense of garment progression in this discussion. And an

acknowledgment that this exhibition, whilst contained in a sterile exhibition space is situated within a vibrant city where many manifestations of dress are lived in and performed by its occupants.

Another example of context came from a bright orange hi-vis vest (see figure 5) which featured in this exhibition. An item which at first (and even second) glance appeared to be an article of protective wear, a piece of uniform belonging to a railway worker or someone who worked in the construction industry. However, if you leaned in close enough (or read the sign), you could just about make out the name Burberry on the matt black poppers which closed the front of this runway garment.

This is a clear example of the “replication of archetypal functional garments”, so inherent in menswear design, expressed by Groves and Sprecher (2019). There is something tangibly playful about garments such as this. The act, by the designer, of inserting an out-of-place design in a new context can challenge what the gazing audience thinks of varying notions, including identity, value and, less tangibly, appropriateness. Although this playfulness can seem light-hearted when the garment in question is bright and colourful, such an act also alludes to a challenge of the status quo, an empowered action which actively engages with the politics of the gaze. Gaze, in the context of the exhibition space is complex, but this becomes increasingly convoluted when the articles on display are male dress. There is an element of Butler’s (1990) feminine gaze at work here, whereby the costume of performed male identity is in part constituted through the reciprocated gaze of the exhibition’s attendees. Yet at the same time, with garments echoing a colonial past such as the iconic wool redcoat (see figure 3) – still emblematic of colonial aggression – there are some observers who may experience aspects of Kaplan’s (1997) imperial gaze, with the garments themselves allegorically defining the observed, through a hegemonic privileging of the garment and by association the previous wearer. There will always be an element of this when assessing the gaze that falls upon a uniformed military body, not only because of the symbols inherent in such garments but also because of the state sponsored power that such symbols represent (see Bluteau, 2022: 61). However, in cases such as the redcoat, garments which embody or emblematically assert a link to a specific colonial past are seen differently by different people, with the experiential reality of the gaze which falls between gallery attendee and object being constituted as part of the lived experience and historical narrative of the attendee. There is a phenomenological quality to this kind of gaze which exists within the gallery, drawing on a rich post-colonial narrative (see Said, 1978; see also Fanon, 2005, 2008) but presenting in a variety of guises to various attendees, from the corporeally sensuous to the cerebrally intellectual and even the non-existent.

There are many gazes at work in this exhibition space, dictated by the garment, onlooker and broader context within which the gaze occurs. I suggest that with a reductionist lens Foucault’s (1994) medical gaze is a good way to start thinking about the relationship between exhibition goer and the garments on display holistically. There will of course be a complex layering of gazes occurring across time and three dimensional space, but by the very fact that the garments on display have been plucked from their intended context, archived and displayed like pieces of taxidermy – stuffed with a mannequin – there is an unequal power dynamic between gazer and artefact. This goes both ways, as while



**Figure 5.** Hi-Vis Orange Vest by Burberry (exhibited at Invisible Men at Westminster Menswear Archive).

the garment is removed from use and held in a sterile inertia – somehow temporally detached from the typical life of such a garment – this atypical existence is rarefied and signals that the garment has been ordained as special and worthy of this treatment. Yet we could still question which way this gaze is falling, are they looking out or are

we looking in. There is a further question here regarding the context provided by the mannequin itself, but this is for future exploration.

This power inequality constituted through Foucault's (1994) medical gaze is vital to understanding the gallery space, but is overly simplistic in such a context. As such I postulate that we must consider the conceptualisation of a gallery gaze. This gallery gaze is a melange. An overlapping series of gazes shared between different objects and onlookers, yet all held within the structural space of the gallery which implies an inequality between object and attendee. Indeed Schroeder (1998: 208) suggests that the gaze implies the "gazer is superior" to the object being gazed upon. In the case of a gallery such a relationship could be conceptualised as a visit to the zoo. However, these caged clothes also provoke desire, display a history and may well be imbued with a certain snobbery or inaccessibility. Certain garments on display would only be accessible to those with a certain degree of wealth, or military status.

However, if we are to take Lacan's (Miller, 1997: 215) concept of the gaze in its strictest form it becomes necessary to question whether this gallery gaze is really a gaze at all. Lacan (Miller, 1997: 215) tells us that (following Sartre, 2003: 340) the gaze is reciprocal, and this may problematise the gallery situation, as we can gaze upon the garments, but can they gaze back? Lacan deals with this issue and later suggests that inanimate objects can produce a gaze (Lacan, 2018: 67), but in the context of the gallery space, how does this work?

The question of the return of the onlookers gaze is, I suggest, a riff on the theme of invisibility once again. Miller and Woodward's (2012: 89) "postsemiotic garment" does not return the gaze. In the same way much military uniform, from the camouflage of Disruptive Pattern Material (DPM) commonly used for military field uniforms to the lavish designs of certain dress uniforms (see for example figures 3 and 4), refuses to return the gaze in certain contexts. This could be due to the uniform nature of such items – a room full of soldiers wearing the same uniform effectively renders such uniforms postsemiotic (bar certain symbolic necessities such as badges of rank) – but in other contexts such as when DPM is employed in a combat zone, the lack of the returned gaze is due to the camouflage nature of the fabric being employed effectively. In contrast, should such garments be seen in another context, on the street for example, the circumstance changes and the gaze is reciprocated. I conceptualise this phenomenon as layers of visibility, manifested through degrees of reciprocated gaze.

Prior to the full reciprocation of the gaze, when in fact the gaze is not a gaze, but a lesser form of seeing, this must be conceptualised as a look. Such thinking stems from Sartre's (2003: 340) notion of "the look". So when visibility is shrouded through a lack of reciprocation due to some form of enacted invisibility, the gaze cannot be a gaze but only a look.

"what a look"

"...wow...what a look" I hear over my shoulder. A group of Westminster University students have appeared from the back corner of the large room and are excitedly gathered around an outfit on display, discussing it diligently before moving on to the next. The

object in question was a green one-piece garment (see figure 6), which I initially took to be a piece of avant-garde fashion or some kind of hypermodern streetwear. The polyester and nylon mix forest green onesie displayed many of the key design traits of a garment which drew heavily on punk styling. A laced décolletage hinted at the constraints of corseting



**Figure 6.** Chinese Fighter Pilot's Anti-G Suit (exhibited at Invisible Men at Westminster Menswear Archive).



and the garment was further festooned with chunky exposed zips, at the cuffs, shoulders, ankles and fly. However green clad tubes which flowed out of the midriff of the suit paradoxically lent an alien-like quality to the garment – which at the time seemed to cement the status of the outfit for me as a piece of runway fashion – yet actually gave the strongest hint as to its true purpose.

Far from being a fashion item, as I had initially suspected, the garment was, on further inspection of the exhibition label, a Chinese fighter pilot's Anti-G Suit. A pressure suit designed to stop the pilot from falling unconscious whilst completing airborne manoeuvres resulting in high G-forces. There is a tangible emotive link to garments such as this, not only because of the romanticised role which members of the armed forces enjoy, but also because of the glamour attached to objects which are involved in especially adventurous or perilous pursuits. "...matter has emotional efficacy", Svašek (2007: 243) tells us, "and that material objects distribute the primary agency of their producers and users who experience and construct them as mediators of their own desires, fears and convictions". Svašek (2007: 229) is specifically talking here about "material objects that consist of human remains", but the garments held in this collection can be conceptualised as precisely that, objects which still hold the remnant of past occupants whether through the physical secretions of the body (including sweat, blood and tears – see Bluteau, 2022: 163–164), or through a more abstract notion of symbolic capital – this is a direct argument to new materialism (see Barad 2007). Objects then, such as those on display in this exhibition, can be conceptualised as "subject-like forces...[that] express and evoke emotions" (Svašek, 2007: 243). Wulff's (2002) work on ballet costumes points to a similar conclusion. She argues that garments, specifically for performance (in this case ballet), which bear labels displaying the names of former occupants show "symbolic capital and patina that is quite different to the social meaning of most other used and tattered clothes and shoes" (Wulff, 2002: 77). Comparisons could be drawn here with a wider set of theatrical costume, but also school uniform, bespoke tailoring and military uniform – many of which have the names of previous owners inscribed somewhere inside. There will be variation of course, but the synergy of this historical link to a specific person or persons and the patination of use can make certain garments highly desirable for individuals and museums alike. A good example of this is the auction of a mohair and acrylic cardigan belonging to the rockstar Kurt Cobain which sold in 2019 for \$340,000 (Kreps, 2019). In this case it was a combination of the tangible link to a previous owner, the patination which included stains, cigarette burns and a missing button, and the fact that Cobain had been pictured wearing the garment in the months before his suicide – making it a kind of memento mori. This could, in the words of Svašek (2007: 243), "distribute the primary agency" of the wearer to the new owner or gallery gazer. Now Svašek (2007: 243) uses the term "producer" and "user" to describe those who are able to craft or imbue an object with an emotional efficacy which can then be distributed agentially by the object, and while the term wearer or owner is not used as I have above, they are in my analytical framework comparable. The wearer of such objects both uses the garment in question but also produces the patination which forms such an important tenet of the garment's future ability to exert agency. The owner, when not necessarily the same person as the

wearer of said garment, can also to a lesser extent add to this acquisition of emotional agency.

The life of garments is complex, consider a costume made for the Royal Shakespeare Company by their inhouse costume department, there is a deal of kudos here, but then worn by several famous actors, their names inscribed inside. Or imagine a military dress uniform made by a highly acclaimed tailor, in an esteemed Savile Row tailoring house, and then worn by a decorated war hero, and later sold second hand and worn by a musician on stage. I have seen garments such as this during my ethnographic fieldwork, and while these specific examples did not feature in this exhibition, they are extended examples of how ownership of a garment, and what this means for the agency of that garment, can be complex. There are certainly parallels to be drawn here with the work of De La Haye, Taylor and Thompson (2005) regarding a collection of clothes worn by six generations of women from one family. There is a great deal of invisibility hidden in the life of a garment, some accessible, some lost forever, but all adding to the context-dependent agential reality of the still existing object.

Fundamentally much of this depends on how one looks at the garment. In the previous section concerning uniform, much was made of the gaze as both an individual strand of regard between object and viewer, but also as part of the continually overlaid and four-dimensional reality of all the gazes that exist within the rarefied gallery space. As I have said before, context is key. The flight suit which appeared on first look to be a fashion item was in fact something else altogether. This look is directly comparable to Sartre's (2003: 340-400) look, where the looker is looking without being themselves seen. Sartre's (2003: 347-349) example of this is looking through a keyhole. Crucially, in the gallery it is never just a look, because of the context. The context of the gallery means that there must be a gaze, and a very specific kind of gaze: the gallery gaze. This is due to the nature of the objects on display, empowered and curated, which grants them the necessary status and visibility to reciprocate the gaze.

However, this gallery gaze is not a one size fits all reciprocated gaze, but rather a series of overlapping gazes as different attendees at different times look at different objects, with attendees each performing their own individual type of gaze, bringing their personal level of connoisseurship (see Bluteau, 2021: 67-68), interest, lived history, bias, gender, class and historical knowledge. With all these various gazes abounding, and the very nature of the gallery space, it is all too easy to ridicule the notion of invisible garments. The objects on display are clearly visible, and people are visiting the exhibition with the express purpose of looking at the garments on display. However, it is not this simple.

## ***Destruction***

The selection of early Alexander McQueen garments felt especially out of place in this exhibition of invisible menswear, although paradoxically viewing them was my primary reason to attend. These examples, drawn from collections predominantly between 1997-1999, display McQueen's experience as a Savile Row trained tailor to its full extent, by pushing the realms of what is possible to achieve. Dramatic silhouettes sat alongside suits made up of several different cloths, radically reconstructed in a frankensteinian fashion, as though two suits had been cut up and glued back together – but

with infinitely more exquisite tailored finesse. Other pieces included a tailcoat with more fabric to one side of the front than the other giving a graceful draped effect, which should not have worked yet somehow did (see figure 7), and then in the centre of this collection an astonishing black coat (see figure 8). From the front this black coat was quite ordinary,



**Figure 7.** Grey tailcoat by Alexander McQueen (exhibited at Invisible Men at Westminster Menswear Archive).

single breasted with neat lapels in a fine wool fabric with a faint grey chalk stripe, but it was the back of the coat that was special. The mannequin wearing this black coat had its back to the gallery, displaying a beautifully tailored slash, across the rear of the coat, as though McQueen had simply lashed out with a razor blade. Yet there was no raw edge,



**Figure 8.** Black Coat with Slashed Back by Alexander McQueen (exhibited at Invisible Men at Westminster Menswear Archive).

the lining melded seamlessly into the gaping wound and the fabric fell with an elegance that looked organic – dramatic yet understated. Very little about these garments was invisible. Yet why was this the case? The coat itself, bar the disfigurement and the fact that it was displayed with its back to the viewer, was unremarkable. An easily overlooked stereotypical piece of office wear, that one might walk past on a London street without a second glance. It is the action of destruction as an artistic pursuit that mutates this garment, imbuing it with emotional agency and inherent visibility.

This particular coat evoked for me the work of the artist Lucio Fontana and his series of works known collectively as *Tagli* (cuts). I was fortunate to view his 1960 work *Concetto spaziale 'Attesa'* (Spatial Concept 'Waiting') in London's Tate Modern collection some years ago and was stuck by the simplicity and power that could be engendered by a destructive act. Not to mention the ensuing affect such a paradoxically creative act could have on an audience – confusing, manipulating and charming the ensuing gaze in equal measure. *Concetto spaziale 'Attesa'* is a blank square of unprimed canvas, that like McQueen's coat has been slashed by the artist (Howarth, 2000). Devoid of context, the canvas like the coat may be seen as irreparably damaged. Visibility then, is not only about the literal visibility of the garment, but the visibility of an abstract value – what Baudrillard (1981, 1998) would term a sign-value. In terms of these slashed examples this is the realisation that the objects are not damaged – as would be perceived by a look – but are in fact impacted by a form of extreme patination. This performed action ceases to be a destructive act, but instead becomes an attempt to craft, create or produce authenticity – or at least the performance of authenticity – once the look has become a gaze. In the case of McQueen's coat, from his AW98 collection entitled Joan, references to Catholic martyrdom and historic bloodshed were juxtaposed with strong sexualised female characters (Bethune, 2015). Indeed, even the lining of the coat featured a blood drip motif alongside the repeated McQueen logo. If we are to conceptualise clothing as a second skin then the wound in the skin of this coat vividly evokes pain, violence and suffering, as both an offensive act and historical reality. Yet if such a coat can be conceptualised beyond a second skin as a performative object, then such an object can exert the storytelling of performative agency. Such abilities are heightened by context, be it the catwalk or the gallery space, with these spaces allowing for a greater visibility of the performed agency – or visibility – of the object. With this notion of visibility being, as before, not literal but a sign-value.

## Conclusion

This article has introduced a theory for the gallery gaze – a specific form of the gaze which exists within the exhibition space. This gaze (drawing on Lacan, 2018: 67-105), emphasises the inequality between object and attendee, but highlights the reciprocal nature of the gaze within the gallery space. Beyond this, the gallery gaze asserts that the space of the gallery engenders a specific kind of looking, which is unique between each looker and object, with these looks being reciprocated by objects which have been granted the status to reciprocate by their elevation to the status of exhibit – an idea which could also be expressed in terms of sign-value. Given the infinite potential


forms of gaze that can take place within the gallery, these cumulative regards are here conceptualised as the gallery gaze, an overlapping series of individual gazes which form in the four-dimensional space, bound within the structural confines of the gallery.

Using this theoretical construct, this article has explored how garments can be intellectually, semiotically and symbolically invisible. Yet this invisibility is a visibility of progressive degrees, not inherent in the object, but rather in the eye of the beholder. This is, as I have established, sensitive to context and it is a change in context which allows for the various degrees of (in)visibility to become manifest. Whilst there is a philosophical question here – asking whether anything can exist without a specific context – this is a moot point, for context is inescapable as it shapes the gaze. Even a forgotten garment in a lost wardrobe would be recontextualised once the doors are opened or the wardrobe is remembered. If neither of these conditions are satisfied then, whilst the garment may still exist, it is in a truly cerebral sense invisible. In the case of clothing, these degrees of visibility can be rendered: intellectually – such as a misunderstanding of a distressed garment as damaged rather than patinated; semiotically – like Miller and Woodward's (2012) blue jeans; and, symbolically – with examples including the symbolic capital of previous owners not being known, or uniforms losing their power in certain contexts. In each case, when such garments are invisible they are in a context where a look is not reciprocated and as such no gaze exists.

With the theoretical pillars of the gallery gaze, and progressive degrees of (in)visibility being established, all that remains is to recapitulate on the questions which I began with. Cole (2000: 2) tells us that the root of invisible menswear stems from the view that “an active interest in clothing” is “feminine” and that men who defy this and “dress up” are labelled as peculiar, or more probably homosexual. Whilst this has by no means been a constant throughout the history of menswear, 20th century scholarship certainly promoted this view, and many 21st century exhibitions simply imagined a greater interest in womenswear – an all too obvious allusion to Mulvey's (1985: 809) proclamation that “man is reluctant to gaze at his exhibitionist like”. There is certainly a patriarchal bias to this, that views the dressing up of the women's body as more aesthetically engaging, and there are links here to the categorisation of indigenous artefacts by early anthropologists, as noted by Taylor (2004), with everyday indigenous artefacts being collected and exoticised. This is the basis for the interest in dandies and peacocks, the men who do not fit, a conflation of otherness, flamboyance and peculiarity, making these items exotically interesting. Somehow not quite male, not quite female (a clear allusion to the concept of a third gender - see Herdt, 1996). Yet despite the protestations to the contrary, there was much of this in the Invisible Men exhibition, from the golden kaftans to McQueen's slashed coat – and objects such as this would be very visible in many contexts. However visibility, when conceptualised as I have in this article, becomes a valuable tool, as it is not the visual visibility of an object or garment, but rather how clearly we notice it that matters. This is the key to why western menswear has been relatively neglected by scholarship, as the intricacies of outfits are only visible in certain contexts, yet accessing these contexts can be difficult, and discussing the nature of this visibility clandestine. Masculinity is beholden to performance, and performance to costume. Perhaps the greatest performance of all has been the sidelining of menswear to the point where it is invisible on the street and absent from galleries. Only by placing such

objects back under the anthropological lens can we learn how gendered and hegemonic semi-visible masculinity can be made visible.

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