





Dior was Alaïa before Alaïa was Alaïa  
John Galliano

WHO'S AFRAID OF FASHION?

For Princess Nadsumo and Elisabeth,  
For Jan Mazy  
For Pierre, Carla, Max, Jim  
and especially for the Jolly Good Guru!

WHO'S AFRAID OF FASHION? Notebook on Azzedine Alaïa  
Roger Connah © 2023  
ISBN: 978-1-987899-10-8

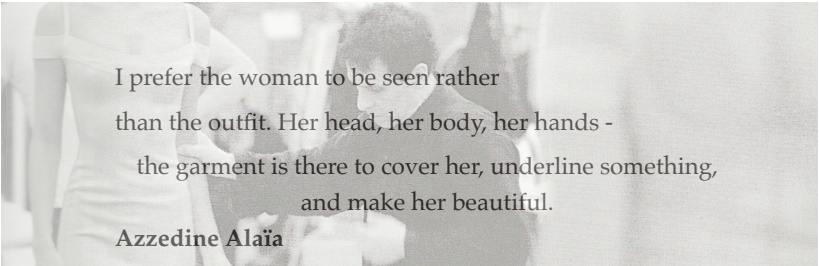
This notebook is collated out of journals, texts and other documents  
initially prepared by Roger Connah in association with  
Pierre Peyrot, Mondo Boxo Productions, Paris (1997-1999)  
Designed by John Maruszczak

CRITICAL FICTIONS Vertigo Press (Forth Worth) Texas, USA  
Vol.1 My Mother as Samuel Beckett 2022  
Vol 2 Who's Afraid of Fashion 2023  
Vol 3 I Am Charlatan 2023  
Vol 4 Flesh for Fantasy 2024

All Rights Reserved

WHO'S AFRAID OF FASHION?  
Notebook on Azzedine Alaïa

Roger Connah



I prefer the woman to be seen rather  
than the outfit. Her head, her body, her hands -  
the garment is there to cover her, underline something,  
and make her beautiful.

**Azzedine Alaïa**

Preface  
FRENCH CURVES

1  
THE SOLITUDE OF FASHION

2  
LE JOUEUR

3  
"CUT!"

4  
DOCUMENTS  
SECOND SKIN - PETITS RÉCITS  
FRENCH CURVES - UN PISTOLET ET UN PERROQUET  
ARCHIVE - FILMED MATERIAL

## FRENCH CURVES

### preface

This notebook began from a request to film the haute couturier Azzedine Alaïa. It was always ambiguous who would pay for this film and who commissioned the film. It should never have got as far as it did. Even after many hours of what seemed to be filming, I was never sure whether Monsieur Alaïa understood he was being filmed or wished to be filmed. Yet whenever we - myself and my colleague the producer PP (Pierre) - gained access, he never said no.

A documentary notebook such as this is obviously a matter of trust. It goes back to the past to come together today. The only approach possible seemed to offer a discretionary and personal narrative that takes serious what Mr. Alaïa took serious whilst acknowledging the paradox and secrecy of fashion, fame and privacy. It is difficult to see how an artist can remain anonymous in the world of fashion. Editorial treatment was considered crucial in achieving the 'flow' and intimacy of the miniature portraits that would make up the filmed scripts on this man. And balancing the notebook quality of the digital camera with the sharper images of photographs would possibly give the work another edge in resonating with the process of detail and emphasis in Alaïa's 'perfectionism'.

Fashion though has a short-term memory. It can also document the regularity of our own time as much as its eccentricity. The visual treatment of the

film was supposed to suggest this. The silence, insolence and solitude within fashion, its noise and stylisation, the default to a male gaze, all emphasised the brilliance, the preferences, bias and quiet technical mastery of Alaïa.

*Who's afraid of fashion?* Contained within is both reluctance and excitement. The visits to Paris and Groeningen in 1997 and 1998 became part of the un-made film. The list of the material shot with a small digital camera is included in the documents. Various sketches for an idea, a shooting script were drafted, communicated and then locked away, cut off. Nothing went through. Various ideas for a book were imagined but always with the feeling that someone else had already written this book.

This leads us sometimes to condemn ourselves to an accidental life. Sometimes it is the secrecy in our lives which is left to be re-discovered and to hide once more the irrepressible nausea and melancholia. I attended the house, the *maison of Alaïa*, as a guest just as I played with my Godson's toy cars and tractors, just as I constantly felt the wet corner of my daughter's comfort bear as I write this for her. I could imagine how we would even plan a route under the sofa. This route under the sofa, the pranks Monsieur Alaïa could play on all his visitors are the nearest I will come to the book never written on this unseen film.

Roger Connah 1997- 2023



*1*

THE SOLITUDE OF FASHION

## IRRESPONSIBILITY

There was a tiredness in my approach to film and filming which I hadn't expected to come quite so quickly. I had after all made only three or four small films in the last few years. Off the cuff, and off the wall! Stamp collecting. Films that saved me hanging around billiard halls, fashion shows and cocktail parties. These had been made possible because of the development in video cameras. Using a small Hi-8 camera had been a revelation to me. I could frame the picture as I liked. I could stop and start when I liked. I could return to things I taught the Mass Communications students in Jamia Millia Islamia in Delhi between 1986 and 1988, and realise they were not all nonsense. In fact, I could go against any rules for camera work and editing. I could pan when I didn't need to. I could zoom when I shouldn't. I could hold a frame longer than the textbook tells you. Which in fact is what I did in these small films. Then I received a telephone call out of the blue.

The vaguest of vague ideas of making a documentary film on the fashion designer Azzedine Alaïa. The name was familiar, but I could not quite tell why, nor what exactly he was famous for. I couldn't even spell his name correctly when I got off the telephone and tried to tell my wife. Fashion for me was a blur somewhere between the glamour of it all (mostly New York, Paris, London and Milano) and my embarrassingly warm student memories of turquoise-flared navy front-flap trousers, tight Breton sweaters and Afghan coats.

But fashion was also the studied amusement I found so many years later in the books of Roland Barthes. Though I had a copy of *Système de la Mode* (The Fashion System), which I had also read, I remembered that this was not a book strictly on fashion at all.

It was a study about the language 'system' used to describe fashion. Not even that. It was a study of the way language was used to write up garments, and contest the fashion they were supposed to represent, and thus become. Language made from clothes the fashion someone else wanted them to become, and - more importantly - wanted you to believe they represented. If I remembered correctly, according to Barthes, the rhetoric of this language tries to make the garment correspond to what we express about ourselves. The descriptive prose used in the fashion magazine merely plays up to the complex or simple role we want to act out in front of society.

Though I liked this book, it was Barthes' Garment System in his earlier book *Elements of Semiology* that intrigued me. I had come across the book in Cambridge in 1973. In it, Barthes attempted to trace how fashion itself (not the language used about it) could be seen as a language, as a signifying system. *System* and *syntagm* were the two words I remembered. A system: sets of pieces, clothes that cannot be worn at the same time. In other words, forbidden within the system, no two pairs of trousers or two pairs of hats can be used at one time.

Unless of course in the pantomime act of the changing hats within Beckett's

*Waiting for Godot*. Suddenly two hats where there might have been one. And *syntagm*, the word with the unsilent 'g'. It meant juxtaposition, the relationship of different elements, types of garments. The meaning these different clothes created when assembled together was what, I supposed, made up this garment system. By the time I had struggled through this application of linguistics with no background to it whatsoever, I had become one of those Barthes orphans released into the world of reading culture in the 1970s and 1980s.

With a few chosen words, and careful repetitions and a terminology you vaguely understood, anyone could be turned into a cultural critic. Catastrophically, I was set on a course of applying loose ideas from the minds and words of others. Was I to become another version of V S Naipaul's *mimic men*? To write out life without ever being a writer seemed a brave option. And one again catastrophically, I never really lost an attraction to those ideas, to mimicking the intellectual one would never become. Perhaps though, I began to grow out of these ideas. Or away from them. What I remember mostly about this garment system is the obvious play of garment on garment, levels on levels, layers on layers. A compost of interchangeable meaning.

## CARNIVALISING MEANING

I am not sure how aware I was then, in Cambridge during the 1970s, of confusing the conventions of writing fashion by layering my clothes. I do know that my father had extreme difficulty seeing his son in a shaggy Afghan coat, blue pin-striped hip-hugging flares and dandy synthetic-leather platform heels. And one thing I wasn't prepared for, but which has stuck like a leech. I didn't know meaning would suddenly be sought in every gest, every finger-flick, nose-pick and wipe. As we had already carnivalized our clothes at university, buying from The Salvation Army, The Army and Navy Stores and any chance jumble sale, I should have realised then these were not particularly new, surprising or startling ideas.

1968 had by-passed me with a particularly vacant expression and embarrassing haircut (or rather lack of one). I bought all the books but didn't play in the team. I often wondered whether I was condemned to pay for my irresponsibility by spending the next twenty years dropping out and catching up on the self-aggrandisement and disenchantment of that year.

It might be that Roland Barthes' ideas no longer surprise us today, but I still had a soft spot for those little Jonathan Cape books with blue, green and purple pastel covers. Because of the other writers, poets and thinkers published in that series, I always held this community together, dear in my lost world: Levi-Strauss, Havel, Mrožek, Leiris, Hikmet, William Carlos Williams and Karl von Frisch. The last author was responsible for the book that intrigued

most, the one that remained unread more than the others: *Bees: Their Vision, Chemical Sense, and Language*.

cannot be a coincidence surely, that many of the designers now working in the capitals of fashion are precisely those who have either read these books, even as long ago as the 1970s, or then they have begun to re-discover the same ideas at fashion school and on the catwalk. Perhaps they too, like Isaac Mizrahi or Thierry Mugler, were condemned to catch up with a world of influence and mimicry, eclecticism and cinema. All of which however I felt has absolutely nothing to do with the Tunisian- Parisian couturier, Azzedine Alaïa. Did not the idea of a documentary film on a Tunisian sculptor and Parisian stylist who made the most exquisite close-fitting, body-hugging garments of the last two decades of the 20th Century ask for something else? I even felt such a film asked for someone else besides me. I immediately felt I wasn't the person who should be doing this. I wasn't even the person who should be asked to do it. Buddha told me so! Weeks past, months even; I was literally joyous in the thought that the idea had collapsed.

Instead, books began to arrive by post on his work. And in return other books and the three modest films of mine were sent off to Paris. Books of mine I hasten to add that had no connection to the subject of fashion and clothes, designing and modelling. I certainly couldn't imagine that a few projects carried out with an irresponsible passion for writing out one's life in the margins, and a discipline for breaking the rules of film, gave much weight to the job of appointing a director. I imagined the books lying around in the Maison Alaïa

for a day or two, then used as a drinks' mat, or an ironing board, and finally scuffed enough to go into a shelf high up in the garret kitchen overlooking the Marais rooftops in Paris. The films would mix with countless other VHS tapes until the magnetic force leaked. Five minutes would be enough and then Sean Connery, Sophia Loren or Peter Sellers would be back on the screen. Ambition-less, I thought I was safe.

## HOW MUCH IS THAT DOGGY IN THE WINDOW?

However, just in case, I began to look at a few documentaries to see if my own irresponsibility and disinterest could be matched by others. Douglas Keeve's film *Unzipped* on the New York Fashion designer Isaac Mizrahi was pleasantly professional to be embarrassing. Of the Early Kodachrome, I knew which kind of film I could never make. Then there was Wim Wenders' *Notebook on Cities and Clothes*, an approach which I suspected bored the general audience but which I had more interest in. Wenders' search for the perfect image, mixed with Yohji Yamamoto's search for perfect form, the cutting and layering of silk, seemed to have the type of religiosity that my own irresponsibility would like to attempt. I also came across 32 *Short Films about Glenn Gould* and imagined I could do the same thing without any crew, any script, any narration. The idea of a silent movie in fact so enthralled me after catching snatches of *Nanook of the North*, and seeing the wastes of Northern Canada, that I made an experiment. I put on the film on Mizrahi, took off the sound, and played different types of music with it, whilst my daughter Princess Nadsumo danced. Michael Nyman's *Draughtsman's Contract* and *How much is that Doggy in the Window* were simple and suddenly the film told a hundred different stories. The creativity of the creative New York darlings disappeared, and tragedy moved elsewhere. I was thoroughly enjoying myself and, dancing with the Princess, I suddenly knew I was the right person for the job! I'd heard the Museum in Groningen (Holland) was interested in getting a big-name director to do a documentary. Bruce Weber's name came up. I was relieved. I could relax. The moment for anti-talent had arrived.

Before deciding on who should make this film, it was obvious then that we should meet in person. So imagine how I felt sitting on an aeroplane on its way from Stockholm to Amsterdam, going to meet a person whose name I couldn't even spell. I would be told by the coordinator of the exhibition project that I might even meet up with a model or two. Naomi might be there. This was said with first-name breathlessness and foreboding. Someone was trying to tell me: *so don't blow it!* This made me shudder. And remember, Alaïa certainly doesn't need you. To be told this, with the stress definitely on the word 'you' was comic. What possible help could I be, in a strictly career-less world, attempting a form of ambition-less writing, sitting out in exile in Stockholm, a fashionable but nervous margin of the world? And me? So small, so marginal to the world of fashion, so unfashionable, I certainly didn't need Alaïa at all. This made me shudder again. If I am not the person who should be doing this documentary film, I thought to myself, this begs the obvious questions. Who should be doing it? And who am I?

On the plane the thought comes to me, perhaps the funniest, wriest of them all, that possibly for the first time in my life I'll be working with someone smaller than me. Naturally my father comes to mind. Alaïa and my father were probably the same height. Though for some reason - is it success? - I suspect the pathos of the situation has never struck Alaïa in the same way it made my father struggle throughout his life. I'm probably wrong about this, but it might be something that I will never know. Somewhere in a magazine, I read Alaïa is estimated to be anywhere between 4 foot 10 inches and 5 foot 1

inch. What seems to be the problem? Can no one get near enough to make an accurate measurement, or is he shrinking?

Suddenly the paradoxes began to grow about Alaïa. I suddenly get the feeling like a little Sultan, he was in control of every exaggeration, every rumour, every prank and every misreading. Every misunderstanding seemed part of this designed world. A deflection! Was there more than something intimate about stature, just as with my own father, that the little tailor never allows to be seen? I recalled something I was repeatedly told over the telephone. Don't blow it. If he thinks you need him more than he needs you, you'll be out. Remember: he needs no one. Shouldn't that be rephrased: If he thinks he needs you more than you need him, you'll also be out.

## MÉMOIRE DE LA MODE

On board SK 555 flying from Stockholm to Amsterdam, it's June 6th 1997. From one of the books sent on Alaïa, *Mémoire de la Mode*, I see this small Tunisian designer is referred to as an *authentique grand tailleur et vraie petite couturière*. Though the English language does not do the same justice to this craft, I think of him unjustly as the 'little tailor'. I mean nothing negative with this, no more than when the writer of the mémoire, Francois Baudot puts it so: *Petit en Tunisie, Azzedine Alaïa, déjà, n'était pas grand*. I think Wittgenstein's Tractatus might help with that sentence. I am to meet the little tailor in the Groninger Museum in the university town of Groeningen in North Holland.

Already amongst the careful pictures of craft and glamour in all the publications on Alaïa that I have trawled through, there have been more than a few hints of a humorous man. A prankster even! One photograph in particular struck me. He is standing next to the towering, threatening other-worldly Grace Jones in New York, where he received an Oscar for his work in fashion. His left-hand rests on the face tilted down, the right hand cups the elbow of the left. It is a studied pose of embarrassment and pride. There is laughter behind the grin that cannot quite form. Another studied grin, posed theatre, is found in a photograph with Jessye Norman and the dress, *La Marseillaise*, Alaïa created for the Bicentennial of the French Revolution. This photograph is stiffer, more composed and more controlled than I imagine Alaïa to be. Achingly other world, no one really wants to be in that position, yet the press dossiers demand it. Two divas perhaps! Again, the grin is held back, as if Alaïa is

a small boy at school knowing someone else is being blamed for something they didn't do.

The third, equally orchestrated and contrived photograph, has more devil about it. It reminded me of something Susan Sontag said about how photography has enlarged our ideas about what is aesthetically pleasing. Either in the name of sophistication or of prettier lies, I think she said. I always remember the last phrase. Was this the fashion world of prettier lies but lies nevertheless?

In the photograph Alaïa is pictured popping out of boxes carried by a model leaving the Maison Alaïa in *Rue de Moussy* in the Paris 4th. It looks as if the photographer has consciously parodied Helmut Newton's studied theatre, or then learned from David Ogilvy when he put a patch over the man wearing the Hathaway shirt. It is not the dogs, the Yorkies and others in the picture that yap and bay that lingers. It is the unspoken look of the woman in the doorway, slightly checking, a touch anxious, delivery book in hand. Alaïa is being delivered along with his own products. The constructed narrative would be less funny if you didn't know he was of such small stature and could - give or take some digital trickery - actually fit into one of these bigger boxes.

## PAPA PIQUE & ALI BABA

On the plane I abandon *The Financial Times* picked up at the plane's entry and begin systematically reading the Alaïa Mémoire by Baudot. Seeking the petits récits necessary to make a film as much as trying to understand Alaïa's world (or is it the other way round?) I scan the text. Words and phrases in French offer up their own little narratives and fantasies: *une phénomène nommé Azzedine Alaïa... papa pique et maman coud. On le pousse, on le couve, on l'encourage. Ali Baba, le souligner, mi-mot magique, mi-cri de ralliement, un nom d'abord murmuré. Azzedine le marginal, le villain petit canard du conte d'Andersen....* Baudot's text is one of those described as deliciously and intimately villainous. As a narration to a film on Alaïa you might have the impression you'd need nothing more. Here is the man, the phenomenon, with nothing left over. But that is where you'd be wrong. The text is as skilfully orchestrated as the photographs. Personal and neutral, informed yet detached, the writer runs the risk of exaggerating the intimate knowledge of Alaïa whilst at the same time making that knowledge limited and sufficient. Only a fashion writer, a journalist of some sophistication could achieve this. Someone, not so far from a Roland Barthes, could write this: *Because everyone who has ever read a fashion magazine is familiar with the typical image of woman projected by the publications. It's essentially a contradictory image, it must be admitted, since this woman must be everything at once in order to represent the greatest possible number of women readers.*

## ON SEDUCTION

I know nothing of Monsieur Baudot but already his seduction works. I purposely slip into my own tongue and think of Flaubert's *Dictionary of Received Ideas*. I write an entry for Flaubert's Dictionary in my own mind. On seduction: The seduction of all writers on fashion must lean towards journalism. Danger and passion gather in the blur of detail. This makes the personal detail on one designer and individual so intimate as to fit all designers. I am not sure my invented entry for Flaubert's Dictionary is so bad. This paradox of passion and platitude is not the writer's fault I feel. Surely it is the phenomenology of fashion itself as it must remain, at all time, in fashion.

Personal details of one designer's life cannot be any more extraordinary than another designer's life. McQueen and Versace, Lacroix and Yamamoto will speak for fashion itself, unless we find a way of writing, or going outside fashion, just as we need to go outside history with apparently great figures. Alaïa was born, worked, died. In such panache and detail, what is it that slips away, and will always slip away from us? Fame itself?

What is it in all this information about Alaïa that makes you realise that something equally provocative, equally elegant will be written about Galliano, Kenzo, Lacroix and Chanel? If this was being irresponsible to the fashion world, then I wanted just that. I wanted Alaïa described, located, spoken of as a male default, as a little Napoleon, as a gamin, a little fox and villain, as a marginal Ali Baba, a thief amongst thieves.

I wanted all this so that I could throw it away, dispose of it, as I expected Alaïa would dispose of it. Knowing how important his inner world was to him, I imagined he knew its worthlessness too, when it ever seeped outside, external to his own skin. It was a gift and a commodity. Just like a film. And just as I would be.

But Baudot's writing on Alaïa did more. He put the marginal in Alaïa into the centre. This has the advantage of allowing us to realise the infinite pleasures of remaining outside, controlled by rumour rather than gossip. And rumour has the advantage of being on the way towards a truth before you happen to get there. Rumour is a privileged world much more graceful than gossip, much more applicable to fashion. Contrary to gossip, the margins in fashion can only work by occupying - once or twice - the central ground.

Very quickly, after a few pages about Alaïa, you realise he has occupied the central ground at least three times in his life. In 1985 twice, in a Museum in Bordeaux and in New York at the Oscar ceremonies. The breakthrough! And in 1989, when the whole of France telecom must have seen Jessye Norman dressed in Alaïa's *La Marseillaise*. You only have to read about materials, and taste the French words used, to feel a voyeur in this world: cuir, macramé, tulle, broderie anglaise, mousseline, crêpe georgette, maille métaille, gabardine, dentelle stretch, colon rayé, agneau glacé. The words used in fashion? Are they more delicious than say in cuisine? Dogs can be the colour of crème brûlée, but a woman in mousseline is already erotic before you see the reality.

## LONG LIVE COUNT GOMBROWICZ!

I was determined to come down to reality and default to my travelling companion Witold Gombrowicz to do so. This of course was unwise and immature. His *Diaries* picked up some years back in San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury had remained with me. They invariably served to prick the balloon of writing and mimicry and bring my own assertions crashing down. I found what I needed: *can we change our women? can a woman change for us? Up until now Paris has imposed a woman on us. That is why Paris reigns supreme in our imagination...* Long live Count Gombrowicz!

Other words pop out of the other books on Alaïa as if demanding more and more explanation which I cannot give: *le diabolò, le couturier, the zip, the boléro, saharienne, hyper-femininity, blouson et sac en jean, mannequin vedette, pied-de-coq, frangée de perles, pèle-mêle hétéroclite, maille panther, cuirs dits grillages, long robe bustier, boléro en maille d'acetate, pupées, stretch effect, (Frankie says) relax..* and one I particularly liked, *robe bustier pigeonnant*. At present I have no idea what it all means but this precisely captures fashion for me. Should I seek to understand it more, as a craft, as an industry, or should I seek its passion, its seduction, go under its skirts so to speak? What, if not fashion itself, upskirted and manipulated often against women, remains supreme in the imagination of Paris?

The words used in fashion, the words I am suddenly meeting, make me think Roland Barthes might be more applicable to this project than I at first thought. And from these words I turn to the next, most important part of fashion, the

names mentioned, those part of Alaïa's world.

To recount them here seems a little scary to me. I feel like a voyeur invited into a fame academy that I have little interest in. I cannot measure the significance they are given in Alaïa's work. There is a world of influence, of aristocracy, the world that belongs to Alaïa as cook, child-minder and dressmaker to the rich in Paris from the years 1957 to 1984: *Louise de Vilmorin*, *Simone Zehrfuss*, *Great Garbo*, *Cécile de Rothschild*, and the name that bridges that world with the runway world of contemporary fashion, *Arletty*. These names make you shudder. As if only as a child you could be allowed close to such people without being afraid, without falling sick.

Then there is this other world, the world of the runway that runs away, always and always, then turns, dragging a fake fur coat along the floor to change so quickly into the next and the next dress: *Naomi Campbell*, *Farida Khelfa*, *Carla Bruni*, *Grace Jones*, *Tina Turner*, *Jessye Norman*, *Stephanie Seymour*, *Helena Christensen*. I imagine there are other names equally important to Alaïa's life and work, names which are hidden behind closed doors, like Schnabel and others, names that exist within a solitude that must also exist in fashion.

For the first time I think how solitary Alaïa's existence must be. Will he need to hide this solitude, or is it a loneliness deflected by friends, by a court, by the desert, by women, by lovers? There is an impertinence in my question which I cannot avoid. Which fashion invites. I read some words by Alaïa himself: *A woman is like an actress: she is always on a stage. She must look beautiful and*

*feel good...Her clothes must be a part of her, she must feel them on her body...I prefer people to take note of the woman and not of the clothes she has on. Her face, her body, her hands - the clothes she wears must dress her, enhance her qualities and make her beautiful.*

I find these ideas ambiguous and repetitive. I wonder if this is because they are extracts. I have a sneaking feeling that this is a person uncomfortable with words. Perhaps this is a person who is forced to talk about something that is either so obvious or so invisible. Clothes that make someone beautiful, and deflect our eyes away from those clothes, suggest some sort of magician. Magic realism? This is a concern for invisibility, of being seen and not being seen. Purdah comes to mind, an invisibility cloak or the silence within the Egyptian or Tunisian Palaces, the careful infidelity of sultanates.

## THE SULTAN OF SWERVE

The commentary on Alaïa's words treat all this rather differently. With his own words, the Parisian stylist Azzedine Alaïa explains why his "body-hugging clothes swathe women, clearly revealing their forms. Models sculpted in an audacious and sexy stretch material, with a complex play of visible stitches and sinuous zip fastening, modern cuts that border on transgression." I find something odd in this 'king of cling' type writing. Body-hugging clothes will obviously reveal the form of the body. And stretch material, far from being sexy, enables invisibility to take its form. For when the clothes are so tight, the imagination is robbed of its more delicate task, feeling and touching the landscape. Skin and sand. Invisibility suggests infidelity. Rapacious eyes, transgressive eyes. Islam's fear?

My first introduction to the works and words of Alaïa suggest that fashion has never had an easy audience, never found an easy intelligence, and never been able to detach itself from the rhetoric of fashion language itself. Was I moving nearer to Barthes? I recalled Susan Sontag claiming that Diane Arbus, unlike Warhol, did not make her serious work out of "promoting or kidding the aesthetic of glamour." David Ogilvy, I suppose, did not attempt serious work in applying the eye patch to the Hathaway shirt model. Was he merely sensing seduction and appeal? More a prick than a kick? Whether it is an easy appeal, fresh lies or a dishonest appeal lacking moral tone, depends surely on the rhetoric applied to seriousness. Was this appeal with fashion similar to that of photography?

Few will deny that 'appeal' is infiltrated into the war photograph, the famine photograph, the photograph of terror as much as the fashion photograph. Why and how do we try and disarm one photograph of its supposed appeal more than the other? There is something exhaustive about fashion that I felt was forcing me to try and disarm the images. I wanted to remove the appeal they have, as if they were out of control because someone else has attempted to control me.

Am I then kidded into promoting the inevitable aesthetic of glamour by participation? I rage to discover the temptress in the appeal, in order that when it occurs again, I can at least recognise it. It disarms nothing except my own ambiguous seduction for images I am attracted to yet wish to repel. We demystify appeal only to invite that appeal to occur again. Is this not a private balance through which each of us struggles to determine our own moral tone? Fashion is that ambiguity that both allows us to dream and prevents us from dreaming. It seemed to me, sitting there on the plane, that if neither the Haiku nor the photograph makes us 'dream' then neither does Roland Barthes. For me I had to disarm these images, not decode them. In the inflight magazine *Scanorama* I notice an article on Alexander McQueen titled *The Misfit*. Just as journalism requires, its appeal makes me notice the easiest accessible lines, certainly not the most intelligent ones.

Apparently, McQueen killed time as an apprentice tailor by sewing some nasty language into Prince Charles' suit lining. "It's my East End upbringing, you might say," he comments. I wonder if his tongue in cheek is meant just for this

journalist, a confessed fashion victim ever since he saw American Gigolo, or for all journalists?

Fashion is a game certainly and, much like tennis, journalists seem to play up to it. So much so it allows the tailors to achieve more than they ever imagined. The jury is still out on McQueen, but he was of course later to become as influential and as powerful as Alaïa was in the mid 80s. I have no time to take more in of all this fudged fashion before arrival at Schiphol, but it signals the obvious. Was not Alaïa the influence for all those radical fashion designers? Even before Versace, about whom I know next to nothing.

## DIABOLIQUE

I get the first hint that something *diabolique* is going on in this Alaïa project when I meet the coordinator. I was told to look out for a 'black dude with dreadlocks'! Although I expected someone taller (everyone's taller than me, except Alaïa and my father) I couldn't miss him. Black wasn't a theme it was a disease, or so he said. It was wallpaper. Everything was black. Black trousers, black shoes (no socks but they would have been black), black Ray Bans, and at least two shoulder-size black bags containing black files, black pens, black Filofax, black phone and black emptiness.

Within minutes we were in a black train on the way to Groeningen. Noticing how the black race had been subject to a deeper scrutiny at the airport, I asked the coordinator: "Is it more noticeable this obvious racism?" "Why yes", he replied. "I've had friends from South Africa visiting Holland saying it's worse than home."

Sensing nothing was clear about anything, I sat back. I almost wrote: 'I sat black'. In this situation on so many projects one develops a form of interested indifference. At this stage it neither mattered whether I ever saw the little Tunisian tailor, ever made this film, or got as far as meeting world famous models. I was gloriously neutral to the fashion world and this project and thoroughly enjoying it. But slowly, as if sensing the need to talk, I learnt how the project started.

At first it might have been John Galliano. He's so wonderful! The coordinator

had an LA-West Coast-hands-together-no-chance way of saying it. “But with The Givenchy and Dior shit coming down, there was no way we would get a theatrical show on Galliano off the ground.”

I nodded as if I really knew the cutting cheese from the grater. The language was all part of the ongoing show to talk a good game. Just as in Douglas Keeve’s film *Unzipped*, the language came out like *pain au chocolat* on a morning in New York, after the reviews of last night’s show have come out. You’re absolutely right. You’re so right!

I knocked on my own skull to see if I still lived there. Hello, is anybody at home in there? I learnt how the Guggenheim missed out on their own Retrospective of Azzedine Alaïa. The plot thickened, random as ever. The little tailor, it seemed, became the more obvious choice for a Retrospective in Holland through an accident in Florence, a show on Vivienne Westwood and another accident in Paris. Did I really want to know more about this? The fashion world already seemed smaller and as controlled as any other sect in the arts. Sensing boredom, the coordinator (whom I wanted to call The Fat Controller but couldn’t because there was no sign of extra flesh at all) went into overdrive: “And then Groeningen had this amazing building.”

Amazing was said in the LA-Venice Beach-hanging-out come-on way but I was no longer listening. Instead, we swopped ideas for sponsors. It seemed neither ludicrous nor ridiculous that I could bandy corporate names about as if I would be in the meeting tomorrow. The game was up and running and we

had it all planned by the end of the train journey.

*Finlandia Vodka* would sponsor the opening and dinner, *Virgin* would sponsor the exhibition, *Citroën* would sponsor the catalogue, and *Air France* would ship everyone and his sister around the world from the Marais to Groeningen for one night. And of course, Naomi, the Coordinator (whom I decided needed a capital letter right about now) spoke of her as part of the family already. Naomi, he repeated, would host the whole bash in the evening. In our dreams! In our haikus! In our unzipped private skulls! Where was I? Who am I? Who is this *petit tunisienne* and master couturier flying in tomorrow? Why me?

## CORPS DE GARDE AUBERGE, GROENINGEN

I catch up with the rest of this day at 6 in the evening. The hotel is an old auberge being renovated. The room on the first floor at the back is so hot it's unbearable. I throw open the large French windows onto a small roof terrace, enabling me to see down the narrow side street.

On the television there is cricket from England, and I am relieved to be back in my own childhood again. Moments after a shower, I'm ringing with sweat once more. I draw back the huge 3-metre drapes to let the air enter as the sun has now gone. I notice a woman in black bra and panties standing in a doorway about 20 metres away. Because of the oblique angle, I cannot tell quite whether she is speaking to someone or just coming to the doorway for a smoke.

I am slow to pick up the signs. It's possible I have been too long in exile in Scandinavia to notice what's happening. Or then I am just anciently tired with all this pan-semiology around. She leans with her left arm high up on the door frame. Above her is a sign KAMER VERHUUR. 050-3144206. 06-53400029. I wonder why there are two numbers and decide that one must be a mobile phone. The penny drops. The Pimp's mobile! One or two men amble along the street, pass, return, linger, knock on the window, ignore the one woman at the doorway and then suddenly disappear into another doorway. At this, the woman in black presses out her bust aggressively, wantingly!

At Lord's someone hits a boundary and nears a century. It is impossible be-

ing so close not to follow all this and imagine the scenario of those that enter the brothel. I realise now that the woman in black is standing in one of six doorways. All are quite narrow and close together, part of a small, converted townhouse possibly. Suddenly another, even bustier woman in white bra and panties sticks a leg out. I notice the time. 7'0 clock. Sundown. Business time. The last few overs at Lord's. The heat is the reason the doors begin to open. No customers, five women stand there. Heat and impatience solicit.

From the photographs I have seen of Alaïa I get enthusiastic at the 'little tailor' and his collection of dogs. I get the idea of making 2 or 3 minutes, mini-narratives, petits-récits on Maison Alaïa. Probably a crib from the Glenn Gould film. But no interviews, definitely no interviews! The coordinator had spoken in roller-blade continuity of Vivienne, John, Yohji, Rei and Suzy. Damn these first names I thought. Surely, they do not deserve to become someone else's vacant familiarity. I had seen too many documentaries arrange the familiar and friendly, the aunt and the agony, the relatives and rogues, reciting glowing lines about the person involved. Was there any reason to think it would be different this time? Would the fashion community offer serious insight into the daily battle and solidarity between these fashion makers and breakers? Definitely no interviews!

Somewhere I read, in the *maison*, in the House of Alaïa (we don't speak of a household) there are seven dogs and two cats. One photograph, orchestrated to the edge of fake, has them jumping out of Alaïa's Chinese silk-pyjama pocket. Another looks as if it is taken in the *Place des Vosges*.

Other texts speak of this remarkable technician and the court that surrounds him. I wonder if they mean the dogs too. I begin to understand the importance of a person like Arletty to him but doubt whether I can ever touch it. I realise he listened to Oum Kouloum, the Egyptian singer and wonder what appeal this music might have when released from this intimacy. Light on the desert, I thought. I only knew *Hotel de Nord* from the film of the same name and wondered how to put these two together.

## GRUNGE MEETS DECONSTRUCTION, HELP!

We had arrived from the train directly into the museum. In fact, in Groeningen you almost fall out of the train into the museum. I was immediately shown around. The Groninger Museum is architecture gone out to lunch. It is theme park aesthetics hammed up with excessive sign and kitsch. One wonders if excess is even on the menu anymore or still possible today. So contrived its achievement is, it might be a success. I had been sent the promotional book. That book that seems to be produced on all museums and architects today, self-financed and self-authored to convince the sponsors that it is money well spent. Catching this building at nine o'clock later in the evening, the harsh bright sun had finally disappeared. More wonder. Without the sun dancing off its water edge, there was a cheapness in the massing and collision of the architecture. Was this the type of installation architecture that could survive its own embarrassment? Or was it like smudged make-up that has slipped a little too early in the evening? In twenty years or so, I imagine a deserted carnival atmosphere, a type of shanty town growing up all around it. Something like the trade fair pavilions in Delhi, though the water moat here rescues the museum from what would have been a more disastrous flimsier version on firmer ground. The overhead sunlight, fierce and unrelenting, with dust in the air, washed out all the top natural-lit spaces. Little definition was possible. The pallid colour range struggled to release itself from an anaemic shudder, as it rubbed shoulders with the streaky untreated concrete. Goat dressed up as mutton (but that's unfair on the goats!) I already look at the museum as if it was part of this fashion putsch. My vocabulary started to blur. *Grunge met Deconstruction. Help!*

## POLYSEMIC SNUBS

The architectural polemic over the Groninger Museum is of course unfinished and will probably remain so. The building is visited for its own sake; the art, the exhibitions, the collections may or may not draw the audience. Its amputation in the city, out on an island across from the railway station, might appear useful. But its position, its critical status as a fin-de-siècle polysemic snub to the privileged idea of a singular designer seems not to hold. The building, in this oxymoronic age, could equally be designed by a single architect or designer. It could be a software collage, an iconoclastic montage and collision of post-modern symbol and reference. The hyperbole leaves this building no more resembling teamwork as the railway station it faces. I remember fighting through a forest of architectural language in the promotional book. I wished I'd jotted some lines down. On second thoughts I don't.

Upstairs, walking around the office spaces, I feel it is possible that the museum is more pleasant to work in and look out from, than be seen in. I am told this is the grand alibi for *Modern Architecture*. I am told also that this is the perfect space for Azzedine Alaïa. Why? Because he will sing, dance and zip in this space. He will fly. It suits his craft. These were not the words I would use. I think they mean it suits his iconoclasm. I begin looking at the building more thoroughly as if it were clothes, as if drawn, patterned and stitched together as in the work of *Co-Op Himmel(b)lau*. The Philip Starck and Frank Stella parts of the museum, plus the central Alexander Mendini section, sport a cleaner surface aesthetic. I try and rub my hands clean.

Wear is contained, size of joint and component manageable. No zips, no transgression, this is *l'architecture de la piscine*. Water at eye level adds to the experience, like being level with pollution happening elsewhere and never being affected by it. Looking from the sunken passages in this infinity, you are never quite sure what might be floating by. The loss in finesse is more noticeable on the 'deconstructive' side.

1986-1992 was Alaïa's American period. Or so they say. Grunge, I read somewhere, had met Deconstruction on the catwalk in the late 1980s. The result was much transgression, the slashing of detail and the amputation of material and convention. The holes in the blue jeans were stylised, the slash in the body bag was silkened and the sewn-up joint of meat was threaded more expensively. This was flesh for fantasy and reminded me of Billy Idol and Helmut Newton. Newton's photographs, especially those used in *Égoïste* in the 1980s stood in for me, rightly or wrongly, for all fashion. Logical fiction or fictional impotence? In Helmut Newton's photographs any accident is dispelled. Irritation and seduction occur simultaneously. But it was not Newton who launched the era's obsession with meaning and its own tyranny. Like many designers he merely fed on it.

## REASONABLE SUBJECTS?

As I thought of Alaïa, the high orchestration within Newton's work seemed to share a similar, intentional mischief. You cannot fail to be dragged into a reconstruction of meaning and the simultaneous demolition of that meaning, in a single instant. Fashion was offering me a clue to this "destructive" moment, exploiting as it does the simple displacement; fur coats photographed in railway goods yards already "splits" us.

Was this a moment of coincidence? A moment of high fashion, the same moments of leather and tamed sado-masochism in Alaïa's work in that decade? The moment of cheap high-quality magazines, the resurgence of the star-system and video clips of pretentiousness and potential? Even pretention was redefined. No "reasonable" subject existed.

In the 1980s, fashion compiled its own instant history and confounded the relations between the photograph and the subjects supposedly "represented". Like Ogilvy's black eye patch which triggers our memory of the Hathaway shirt advertisement, so Nastassja Kinski with her Marlene Dietrich doll is recalled by the reclining male figure in the background. The labyrinth of fashion is not only fictional impotence, it defaults to male agony. But are there exits?

I remember writing many doomed ideas like this over ten years ago. I called it *Flesh for Fantasy* after a Billy Idol song. The ideas may have been as relevant or as irrelevant then as they are now. So much nonsense perhaps. Back then I

received a note from a professor in one of America's ivy league universities to whom I had sent the manuscript. My writing was obviously so catastrophic that his reply must have been more polite than he wanted to be. To publish such a book, he said, you need to be already famous! In fact, what he should have said was this. To have such unprovable ideas, such nomadic thoughts, and still be considered sane, you must be famous. It is fame that ensures and even masks sanity. Until someone else takes the pin out of the grenade. That's what he should have said.

Can fashion suffer from loss of refinement in the same way as architecture? Have they both collided in some sort of unreconstructed moment? Who pulls out the detonator? In the Groninger Museum, a loss of refinement allows no contrast to finished detail. Balustrades and ground surfaces are as crude as some of the upper winged structures and gliding constructive elements. Of course, the slipshod, even deliberate carelessness suits the wash of natural daylight and the collage of certain types of architecture, as it does some types of clothes. The Museum is neither a disposable aesthetic or the rougher, wilder gamble that Frank Gehry was to achieve in *Bilbao Guggenheim* or Daniel Libeskind in *The Jewish Museum* in Berlin.

This building falls between the two. Hence the more readily facile attributes of carnival and cartoon can be applied. It is quite possible that this conglomeration, this anti-collage of a building grows on one. But its position between a bad speculative commercial spread on the railway side, and a mixed small old

town housing terrace area hardly sets off the show. The signature is not dead. It has only forged someone else's expected autograph. Can fashion do that too, as it re-cycles itself over the decades?

Suddenly it appears more than possible to merge the writing on architecture with fashion. The language begins to stick, as if I wanted to find a pretentious new approach to Alaïa's craft. An approach no one else has discovered. I wanted to tempt the invisible, to consider his exercise one closer to death rather than life. I wanted a greater imagination for the secrecy. I wanted a vision to confirm this. A vision of retreat, a vision from the desert, a vision of the shadow in the souk.

I wanted hallucination, something I could invent. I wanted a more varied performance that I felt would suit his Tunisian ancestry. I wanted another childhood so far away from mine. A childhood that could embellish and exaggerate known facts, a childhood lyrical and cinematic, a childhood suiting the narrative of a small boy sewing hems for 5 francs a piece in Tunis, before picking up the craft from his sister and finally leaving for Paris in 1957.

I wanted a childhood that would explain why a grin can remain unformed, just this side of a diabolical laughter.

Perhaps I already sense that I will never really get Azzedine Alaïa, so I opt for cinema instead. Cleverly this might be what the 'little tailor' wants with his stories and press rumours. Intuitively, this might be what he has done as his clothes have become cinema, and solitude becomes a necessary fortress.

Why do people ask you to do something? What is on their mind? At what stage do they stop doing something because it might not turn out what they want? At what stage would this famous 'gamin' of the fashion world realise that the intimacy of the small video camera could be as malevolent as it could be benign? Did he not already know that the camera lied? Was this not a function of all this theatricality, and was not fashion empty without this scenography? I saw Alaïa's obsession with finish and detail as an attempt to reveal a richer disposable 'aesthetic'. This wasn't the rougher, wilder gamble that attracted the likes of Madonna and Tina Turner. That was just coincidence. I was inventing Alaïa's world before I had even met him. The silhouette for me was the aesthetic most suited to death. The silhouette was what made flesh a contour, and landscape a dream. But it was slipping through my fingers like desert sand. These were ideas I could no longer support. I decided to stop.

## DE PAAU RESTAURANT GRONINGEN

I arrange to meet the curator of the Retrospective, the director of the Museum and the coordinator for a pre-Alaïa dinner. It soon transpires that I am being briefed. I am being given clues as to how to behave in front of a star. Fame asks them to behave differently, and I am informed how not to proceed. There is anxiety in the air, and I wonder why. The others have all met the 'gamin' and his entourage. I learn of other characters that will soon be part of this show. Max, Christophe, Carla and Farida. Names I cannot put a face to. Don't whatever you do tell him about himself, I am told, he hates that. I laughed to myself. What I had to tell the master couturier right now wouldn't even fit on a postcard. Just defer enough to him and it will all be OK.

I was suspicious but tried not to show it. Were these people walking around in fear of the little tailor? Or was the show so important that nothing must come in its way? Not even a documentary film maker brought along for the ride! I had previously learnt how it would all go swimmingly if Bruce Weber, the photographer, would also donate his backstage footage from a previous film. Apparently, he had already filmed some Alaïa fashion shows.

*The Bruce*, he was jokingly referred to, I suppose to differentiate himself from the other Bruce, The Boss! They hoped this Bruce would donate the film material free. As is usual in such talked-up world, I was getting crossed messages. Someone said he'd asked for 1000\$ for this footage. Another said he was giving this old footage free, con amore. Nothing of this was credible but somehow, I couldn't care less.

I doubted if anyone did anything *con amore* in fashion, though they gave every impression of doing so. And I certainly was not about to waste my time thinking just what the right amount of deferral was necessary in order to be allowed to make the film. I was laughing inside a bit like Walter Benjamin. I imagined the types of deference signs one should show. A half-bow Japanese style, allowing Monsieur Azzedine to bow lower? A Hindu hands-grasped namaste greeting? Lotus-open with body sway, arms then wide in a so-wonderful-to-see-you embrace? A broad smile quickly cut off! Or an air-kiss four times to the cheek, peck peck peck peck!

As soon as the clues had been given on how to behave, the more general approximations began: But he's a little tyrant too. In the comments that followed, the entourage seemed to want to correct this alarm and obsequiousness. And on it went throughout the meal. Uninterested I let it drop. My insouciance was fierce. I couldn't imagine anyone seriously alone in the fashion world surviving without being ruthless at some stage. And, as always, those closest to genius take the brunt of it. If he was a tyrant, then I would find out soon enough. Changing tack, I enquired about the dogs. Two dogs were apparently as tall as the little tailor and five other small ones ran around everywhere in the atelier in the Marais. One called CD, though not spelt that way, is often punished for wayward pissing. He is actually put in a small jail especially created for this purpose., I am told. This gave a whole new meaning to being put in the 'dog house'!

Listening to them all talking, I thought of the Maison as just what it was; a *maison* where the master tailor, the little sultan, the gamin of gamins, sits, draw-

ing, cutting and altering patterns and cloth. Second to Armani in some league table or other, I am told, but you'll never find our Giorgio down there on the floor with the cutting scissors. The near-bald curator said this with his hands simulating a food blender. Suddenly they all looked worried.

Underneath this banter, I had the feeling there was real alarm here. What if, the look on their faces implied he actually doesn't go through with it, this filming? What if genius throws a wobbly and goes home? And though this would throw them completely, I had to admit, I'd be quite happy with that. It would save a few people trying to pretend to read a filmscript and make intelligent comments on something they need not bother with. It would save Alaïa feigning interest in something he may not be interested in. And it would save the court reading it and having to make decisions for him that he may never know about.

Duly briefed to encounter *fame* in italics, I returned to the auberge for a spot of night watching from the terrace. But all was quiet. The curator and coordinator hit the Blue-Boy Bar until the early morning. The director ambled home. Tomorrow, I was told, you'll meet the man. It wasn't so late, so I re-scanned one or two of the books on the 'man'. One book informed me that Alaïa's style appeared in the first half of the 1980s and asserted itself, soon becoming the choice of personalities like Diana Ross, Tina Turner, Sonia Braga, Charlotte Rampling and Madonna.

Nominated best stylist of the year in 1985 by the French Ministry of Culture, Alaïa obtained success among the American public, who ignored the fact that

the stylist had already been dressing the Parisian avant-garde for two decades. The thought of reading more and more like this doesn't interest me. In amongst all this late fame and glamour, there must be something else trying to get out. Or at least so I think at this moment. Or is it someone trying to get further in than ever before? Where life and death meet on the surface of the body, an hour after God has turned the juice off! If Monsieur Alaïa wasn't going to let me into his world beneath and beyond fashion, then I was going to invent a world from him. Come what may!

## BLACK BRA AND PANTIES

At breakfast I checked whether the updated version of James Laver's book on *Costume* and Fashion made any reference to Alaïa. I found one reference in chapter 10, p 273: Rationed Fashion to Pluralistic Style, updated by Amy de la Haye: "For evening, many of the more traditional Parisian houses such as Balmain, Dior, Givenchy, relived the structured, highly decorated garments for which they had always been known. Thierry Mugler and Azzedine Alaïa offered a more youthful, bold and covertly sexual image, producing clinging, body-conscious clothes, which sometimes drew on fetishistic corsetry and lacing." The woman in black bra and panties down off the side street from this hotel perhaps also drew on corsetry and lacing for her effect. The brothel was sleeping. There were no signs of life as I drew back the drapes that morning. Not even early morning passers-by. The street was deserted. The light in the *Kamer Verhuur* sign had been switched off.

Later there was another mention of Alaïa in James Laver, a caption next to one of his dresses: "Azzedine Alaïa started showing his collections in 1981. From the beginning he focussed on the shape of the female form, producing body-hugging, clinging garments which were covertly sexual in their appeal. This dress, made even more revealing by the use of side-lacing, is from his spring/summer 1986 collection". I ignored the repetitious, body-hugging clinging-garment text. It flashed through me instead, that in summer 1986, in a blinding 40 plus degrees Celsius that a prediction from a young architecture student who had read my palm for its marriage lines was correct:

I would be getting video-married in India. In the same year Alaïa was virtually atop of the fashion world, this was happening in a Five Star hotel, *Delhi Maurya Sheraton*. I was being married to someone not quite in clinging garments but dressed in a traditional Punjabi festively adorned marriage outfit. Shamelessly, covertly sexual in its appeal as this was to me, her dripping jewellery and lantern-lighting made her even more revealing. And everything was virtually invisible and covered up!

As I left the hotel to walk to the museum, I thought I was onto the Alaïa paradox. He was using clothes to be more revealing, but at every stage he was concealing his own relationship to them. The secrecy and solitude of the 'little tailor' became even more insistent. Even if proved otherwise, and how would this happen, would I let go of this secret?

I arrived in the museum. Coffee was self-service. There was a buzz in the air. Everyone you meet connected to art and museums in the fin de siècle seemed to be so nervous. So involved with their image and career curves, they are positively and, they would like us to believe, creatively edgy. So control orientated, so keen to code their membership to this or that statement, the affiliations leave the outsider indifferent and only mildly amused. Either the anxious paper-heads are smoking furiously on their way up, hoping this project leads to the next and the next. Or they are smoking nervously on their way down and hoping that the project can be saved, and they will, at worst, be moved sideways. Perhaps it is the triumph of sponsorship and commerce that must keep de-radicalising even the simplest vision in art. Art and culture, like

cigarettes, continually damaging health, making the body shake and the nails bitten down to the raw.

As I sat there everything about Alaïa seemed edgy. I still did not have the feeling that this was a real project. I had no confidence that there would be a film, and I certainly did not feel that I was the film's director. Which seemed to me the best way to be, the best attitude to take, and the wildest card to use. I was suddenly quizzed about my career as can happen in such self-conscious environments. I don't remember by whom because none of those involved at the restaurant the previous night could have been interested in any serious personal way. If they had succeeded in getting Bruce Weber, they might have been. Now, unlikely the Bruce would show up, the curator and coordinator managed politeness at best, boredom at worst. To them I was already spare meat. As far as I was concerned, I didn't even have a career. Now they knew it!

Nobody really knew why they wanted a film. It was just that a film seemed a good idea. A film seemed essential. A film could document things the world would never see or know. And so on. No one had actually wanted to talk about what a film on Alaïa could or couldn't do. Films on fashion were an autonomous, unquestionable part of the glamour, part of the talked-up world. Hand-held and nostalgic Kodachrome-frenzy, interspersed with a black and white sequence, slowing down time to allow others to get on and we'd have it. A picture of a cat and a man going to meet another man about a dog, a pistol and a parrot and we'd have the script. Or this is how it seemed in the silent, threatening and threatened, mute world called fashion.

## DAMN IT, HE IS THE PROJECT!

It was probably the Press or Public Relations Officer who asked me the question about my 'career'. When they talk of your career, these press officers usually mean your track record. The reply desires a rehearsal for it is nothing more, and everything more, than a sales pitch about yourself. It has become so common that if you make a slip up, slur your words or stutter, you've had it. You are out. Attention is limited of course to the recognisable words you can use about careers. And if you don't grab the shortspan you can see them yawn already back to their breakfast that morning.

You are advised to go through your own history, as if by this one speech you are being measured for the capability to do the work. It becomes essential to behave as if this is not just one more chance, random at that, to make an intimate documentary film on the world's most important, marginal fashion designer. No, it must appear as a passionate and planned career move. You must assume the 'I'd kill for this project' attitude. If you can't talk a good game after reaching this far in your life, then you are advised, re-think your life!

Fond of the calm melancholia that staying out of all this offers, I manage none of this career-passion attitude. I sit in the Teletubby furniture in the office area of the museum and realise I could take it or leave it. I'd rather have in front of me some finger-paint and daub the morning away in some art and culture therapy class.

The PR Officer looks at me as if the chance to go to Paris, enter the *maison* of

the world's (second) most famous fashion designer should have me in ecstasy, on my back with four legs up in the air, waving and wriggling. Perhaps I am fooling no one. Perhaps I am already dead to this fashion world. My reluctance may be only a clever way of avoiding the fear of attempting anything like this. Perhaps I don't have the bottle. Perhaps I am the one, and not Alaïa, too far inside a solitude that wants only to meet the same solitude in this ultimately shy man-boy; a reserved, innocent Tunisian tailor forced to become a showman in the world's fashion market.

Never wanting to plan anything like this in advance, I take out my small video camera and fondle it. As if this is what a documentary film director making a notebook should do. I think of Wim Wenders' seductive slow monotone, as he discusses the perfect image, or the perfect copy of that image. I check the battery. I remove it and feel it for size and warmth. Then I check the camera, and how the hand slips in and the strap cups the outside of the hand. It feels snug to hand and eye, as I imagine one would feel a warm gun for the snugness of handle and trigger. The PR Officer looks suitably impressed at this indifference and forgives my unsales-like pitch. She asks for personal details of the project. So that I can be ready to release them to the press, she adds with a smile. We need to be prepared. There'll be thousands and thousands. She doesn't say there'll be so many, but I still smile. I don't even have a project. There is no production money. There is no agreement. Hasn't she heard? Is anyone communicating here?

The director, the coordinator and the curator disguise interest for opportunity.

There is no understanding. Or is that the perfect launch for bluff in contemporary culture? Alaïa for me is straight out of the *Jungle Book*. Then I also think of Winnie the Pooh and the Disney version. I see the chipmunk appearing out of the ground and is immediately asked by Owl to help get Pooh Bear unstuck from the rabbit hole. The Chipmunk approaches the Bear and says, first we have to get the bear out. He's gumming up the whole project. Damn it, says Owl, he is the project! This is what I feel like. Remembering Eeyore, I mutter to myself in a low Disney tone: Why Bother! Someone has flown me from Stockholm to Amsterdam, put me up overlooking a brothel, wined and dined me in one of the two best restaurants in Groeningen, warned me how to behave, what not to say and do in order to meet the magician tailor to see if - as the saying goes - we hit it off. The art world seems to be loved by those who love the art world. I couldn't believe a designer like Alaïa didn't see through this. Surely that was his saving, that was his solitude! Damn it, he's the project!

## DUPLICATE CHINESE PYJAMAS

At 1'0 clock on the hot terrace of the Museum, with cycles whizzing past with

Dutch tolerance and driving skill, there I met what I thought of later as black wallpaper. Of course, not everyone was dressed in black. But it started to look like it. And the little tailor had, as I had read somewhere, put on one of his winter outfits. A winter outfit that duplicates the thick black silk Chinese pyjamas that he wears each day, and that the journalists are so fond of reporting. I recall what Marguerite Duras describes as her uniform: "For fifteen years I've had a uniform - the M.D. uniform. It apparently created a 'Duras' look, which was taken over by a fashion designer last year: black cardigan, straight skirt, polo-neck sweater and short boots in winter. I said I didn't care about clothes. That's wrong."

It seemed everyone's hair was jet-black for the occasion. The shades of the curator and coordinator were straight from the movies. Glass to be seen in! Men in black before there was a film called *Men in Black* or even *The Blues Brothers*. We all looked younger, fitter and healthier than we were. We were all on Venice Beach not the Groninger Terrace. The fashion world does that to you, doesn't it! "A uniform is an attempt to reconcile form and content," Duras writes, "to match what you think you look like with what you'd like to look like, what you think you are with what you want to suggest."

Meanwhile a man looking remarkably like Michael Douglas was coming towards us with a sawn-off shotgun. "Where's the architect?" he was shouting. It was a lonely situation. I am sure not only for me.

And I remembered Pooh's reply to Owl when Chipmunk disappeared down

the hole he had made himself: *Well, he's not in the book you know.* That's exactly how I felt with this entourage, this gang, this fashion world, this museum, this icing cake. I wanted the wheels under the train that would be taking me back to Amsterdam Airport tomorrow, today.

It was hotter than ever on the terrace. Group Alaïa was introduced. The tempo and mood were upbeat but there was a cautious drag on proceedings. Alaïa's impishness and humour were apparent immediately. Baudot's gamin-text came through his eyes. As with all who are subject to rumour and exaggeration, you find yourself wondering how it is possible such a person can turn ruthless, mean and vindictive. It isn't possible, you say to yourself. But first encounters are often as accurate as they are tricky.

There was a type of benign obsequiousness to everything. As if all the actors in this theatre knew just how far to take things, knew just what extent their own individuality needed burying under the maestro's. I was reminded of the Finnish architect Alvar Aalto. Benign, humorous, a gent to everyone, but in the office the 'cheffi' became a tiger. Known for demanding his wife to run alongside the lake to measure how much he had swum that day, Aalto was the first one to admit that, without others around, he was no one. Without witness, he didn't exist. Heidegger was right. Neither did his story, or his life. And it is even truer today.

## THE LICENCE OF INVENTION

Accurate or not, in the licence of invention, I couldn't help but think of Alaïa in the same way. It was five years since I had sat and watched a famous architect die. In five years since, his life had been narrowed to the few lines others used about him, when they needed them. Nothing further has been learnt of him. He died with his own story. All the words coming after were the words and inventions of others. For he left none of the usual stories from which to make yet another truth from his life. In private, he even denied some conversations he had had. The night before, or the year before. And here I was, entering someone else's life, somewhere in the middle or past the middle, someone around 60 years old. To do what? To film the parts that are allowable, that repeat what has already been written about the person? To invent the usual stories from which another version of his life can also be made?

Everyone spoke of Az'dine as if they knew you had to leave the central syllable away. The curator took off his shades and squinted in the bright sun. The coordinator's dreadlocks looked as if they were sweating more than the salad. Everyone started undressing. They were to go through the museum, look at the spaces, decide on the rooms available, and the exhibits and themes for the show. Alaïa watched carefully when the talk went into English. I found myself trying to say something in French to indicate at least some sort of competence. It was a futile gest. I didn't try again so arbitrarily. I had the feeling, in the guise of non-understanding, Alaïa was actually taking more English in than he let on. But there wasn't much time to take in more.

Some Rembrandt drawings had just been returned from the restorer in Utrecht and the 'master' was invited to look at them. This it seemed was a rare offer and the group en masse left the cafe to climb into the cold archival store of the museum's tower.

As long as I was discrete, I was informed that - without no one ever quite seeming to do so or take responsibility - I could begin video filming. It reminded me of decision-making in those parts of the world where no one quite takes responsibility. Lacking self-esteem, they anticipate disaster. Covering their tracks, it always means no one takes the blame for failure.

*Mistakes were made*, as the best seller had it, but not by me. It is always possible to say, I wasn't there. I didn't speak. You weren't filming, were you? This was like an endgame where no one could win but moves could be made to please those participating. This suited me and as Alaïa and his long-time friend and assistant Carla sat and were presented Rembrandt's drawings, I disappeared behind the lens. The intimate journal had inconspicuously begun. No film crew. No lighting. No fuss. No staging. No script. No story. No ambition. All discretion? All truth? No direction!

Is it possible to be the cussed ignorer of responsibility? What makes or draws us into a seduction that we sense as irresponsible, yet we celebrate as freedom for the individual? The pornographic image, the erotic image: much noise has been created by attempts to blur the two with the fashion image. But certain things offer less ambiguity.

The *Playboy* nude has an obviousness which renders details like lighting, texture and narrative secondary. I was arriving late in this world of fashion. And I would get out early. Almost fifty years old before taking anything in it seriously?

Or was I clinging to the disastrous fate of those revolutionary sentences from 1968? Was I agreeing with Susan Sontag when she claimed that much of Modern Art was devoted to lowering the threshold of what is terrible. Was this me in turquoise-flared front-flapped trousers trying to understand sentences that had come too late? Or one part of me that wanted to rush to empty all. The world vomits its own bile in language and begins to re-eat!

I was blaming fashion for the theatre of impotence, rumour and indifference. I could no longer construct the 'real' anymore. I had to learn from scratch how to construct a performance so that fear or pain exists for the first time. The random error of Antoine Artaud being right always needs to be rediscovered not repeated.

So too can everything we do turn into a test of our own seriousness or responsibility, or a test of squeamishness. Especially when we spend the majority of our lives in the warmth and comfort of our apartments, dodging the homeless, the addict or the pervert on the tram. But it was another kind of indifference that interested me now. The indifference that expresses no preference for morality or good taste, and so lowers our own threshold. Here I had a clue. No longer was it a question of fashion, but rather what to do with a compassionate response should we still discover ourselves capable of owning one.

## TIRED OF MAKING TEA

There is a story that Alaïa came to Paris in 1957 and worked only for five days for Dior. There are at least three versions of this story, and the Algerian War also complicates the issue. Alaïa got tired of making tea. Dior got tired of him making tea. Or, as a young Arab in the Capital City, such employment was problematic. Everyone gets tired of making tea after all! Thus, he was claimed to have had no work permit, his papers were not in order. Whatever the story, like the person, ancestry, Alaïa's age and anxiety, no one is confirming it. No one needs the truth. Fame and fashion ensure inexactitude.

Quickly, almost discernibly, I pick up the mystery and presence about the man. His way of answering a question can deflect it. It can move it into another area. Or it can be used to respond in any way suitable for the moment. Such a strategy could keep a person sane in the over-inquisitive fashion world. Is it possible to construct a way of *untalking* even when you are talking? Is it possible to say nothing further than what is available, even if one is interviewed? Here, there is that ecstasy in no further communication even when prattling on and on.

As the entourage continues again to walk around the museum, I am not allowed any nearer to the actual person. It is as if an invisible screen has been erected by deference. Damn it, he is the project! I think to myself. I wander around the museum spaces, some paces behind, with the small camera. I feel like Peter Sellers. I follow as they walk and talk, pause and look.

I try and film his gestures, his hands and his face. I capture his stature when framed by the blackness of others. The black uniform has the effect of blurring the middle part of the body. Contrary to his body-hugging forms, the revelation of a woman's body, everything about Alaïa looks simultaneously open and closed, revealed and concealed.

I find myself hanging back with Christophe. Christophe is dressed, crisply un-coded for a painter, in tweed, twill and loafers. When Alaïa stops, the tailor puts his hand, slightly curled, underneath his neck. It is a youthful gesture, the same as that seen when standing next to Grace Jones. I see, without evidence at all, a small boy in Tunis looking at elders, or staring at Oum Koulsom and other women like Arletty in the film *Tempête*. He looks for all the world as if he is taking nothing in. He looks in a trance, not quite all there. I warn myself how much of a mistake it may be to think this. As we wander around the museum like tourists, little huddles occur. Sometimes they all follow the curator who, unable to speak any French, proceeds to make even more effective his food-blender hand signs. It looks arbitrary and – oh my word - at times you think this is merely a show!

Alaïa nods, the curator waves, Alaïa nods again, the curator makes another circular movement as if conducting Wagner. It may look irrelevant but in fact it is purposeful. It advances the idea of a show, and it has the advantage of leaving both parties at the end of this exercise, free to develop their own visions for the next meeting. No one quite makes decisions, but decisions are

made. Alaïa talks tête à tête with Carla, Max his young assistant, and Christophe. But rarely in one group. Intensity suggests agreement, but I doubt if they are that far at all.

This is sketching time. Buying time. Delaying time. Indecision time. Bullying time. Whenever the group stops, one is not sure who is doing the talking as the language moves from French to English to French. Lost to language and the group, Alaïa puts his hands in his Chinese pyjama jacket with the thumbs outside. He smiles at this 'ignorance'. I smile back at him. I suspect in this the knowledge that whatever talk takes place, whatever language or words spoken, he will go ahead and do exactly what he wants. *Barney's* New York will alter whole schedules for an Alaïa late-delivery, whilst reporters will gossip about Alaïa as a has-been.

The problem for anyone curating the show or coordinating the film is that the plan is never fully formed. It can't be. Nothing in a silhouette, nothing in a mirage is ever fully formed. Nor should it be, this is all and ever partial. Like a landscape embedded in sand it can only ever develop and change, be modified, reach some sort of perfection and then beneath the hot sun, die to emerge again.

Alaïa is apparently notorious for eleventh-hour tactics. Having never really wanted to keep deadlines, perhaps he constructs his métier in order to defy the tyranny of such deadlines. Surely, an admirable tactic in the 'big dog eat little dog' world of fashion?

In *Notebook on Cities and Clothes*, Wim Wenders asked Yoji Yamamoto what would happen if he didn't make a collection. Yamamoto replied that you'd be dead. You'd be finished! In the fashion world, if you don't appear, it's all over.

Alaïa seems to have taken the fashion world and made his own rules. Sometimes he appears, sometimes he doesn't. Sometimes a collection, sometimes not. It cannot be failure, nor can it be idiocy. Surely in this tactic is a supreme confidence, or supreme indifference. Best, second best do not matter. Only singularity. But some look at this lateness of Alaïa the other way round. They ignore innocence and suspect failure, incompetence. Unable to keep deadlines, the artist renounces them, and by so doing turns that into the mark of a genius beyond fashion's crowd.

I don't know enough about these collections, the shows in Paris, to decide on this. But to retain control may be the most important thing to such a designer. Alaïa makes sure his singularity is respected. Without singularity in the fashion world, you are eaten up. Which may be why, as I had been told, Galliano, Kawakubo, Westwood and Yamamoto put Alaïa in a different class from all others. They share, perhaps even envy, his achieved singularity. Ultimately it makes me wonder whether he couldn't care less for this fashion world. Which is why, because of Alaïa's size or gamin-behaviour I cannot say yet, to me he is nearer St. Éxupéry than Le Corbusier, nearer Glenn Gould than Christian Dior, nearer Winnie the Pooh than Lucky Luke.

Perhaps Alaïa is the *Pink Panther* who, as he passes, turns everything into the same shade of pink. Did not Deleuze and Guattari speak of this already in the early 80s? Wim Wenders describes this ability of Yamamoto to be singular in fashion as an insolence. I think he's not far wrong. If Yamamoto becomes the guardian of his own prison made from style, and not a prisoner of that style, then within the larger machine we call Fashion, Alaïa's insolence must be one respected throughout the world.

## MORE INSOLENCE

No one is talking much, no one really shares ideas. This is business. I am forced to think about fashion and to make statements to myself that have no echo. Right now, there is no second best. There is only this little magician dressed all in black, shuffling around in Chinese slippers. No one has time to discuss any of these ideas. Why should they? Room after room it becomes obvious, a retrospective of the designer's last twenty years would fill two museums not one. The issue is not what to include, but what to leave out. Not what to reveal, but what not to reveal. Invisibility again.

The first tour of the museum spaces ends and we take a coffee in the museum café, before dispersing to meet up at Muller's Restaurant in the evening. It's in Michelin, I'm told, the only one in Groeningen. Once again, all the stops are pulled out for the magician. But there, before departure, seated in the small sofa in the museum cafe, Alaïa surveys the scene. He watches others talk and tries to avoid the direct gaze into the camera. He knows however he is being filmed, even if it is a small camera.

Affinity and vanity the video camera may share with fashion, but intimacy is hardly possible. Yet this cannot be the first time he has been filmed. Is there something of the soul about to leave? When the digital image is so accurate that nothing of you is left? More than twice, I find him correcting a gesture of the hand on the face, as if he knows one side of the face is less flattering than the other, as if he can sense the image being filmed. I have the feeling he knows I know.

I think he hates the camera for the prettier lies it will inevitably deliver, for the soul it removes. Yet why talk of lies? This small camera can only be showing lies if there is an image against which all this deception is measured. Does such an image exist? Is there a classic image of a fashion designer to suit the classic filmed image? And if this image does exist, it exists only within Monsieur Alaïa's imagination of himself. Then, I realise, he is doing just what I cannot avoid doing. He is inventing himself for the camera.

Fashion, it is often acknowledged, is the here and now. No yesterday, no tomorrow, yet everything defined by this absence. Fashion though seems no longer as ephemeral as it would like to be. By cycles, by influence and the limitations of its own craft, it must return. Fashion always returns even to the future. Looking through the camera at Alaïa sitting there, not always filming, his eyes follow the lens. If you express something, if you talk and speak, is it true that you always want to be understood? Did Alaïa want to be understood? Already I was filled with uncertainty, for what ways are there to lose any more control within this fashion machine?

You can control an interview. You can control a text. You can ask for the questions of an interview to be prepared and shown in advance. You can correct the answer given by giving more of an answer. You can walk out of an interview without giving any explanation. You can sabotage insight and understanding in the service of another insight, another understanding. You can enjoy descriptions, enjoy being described, yet you can refuse questions that cannot be answered in the way imagined

But once inside the little digital machine - Alaïa looked at the camera at times menacingly, as if he could see through it - once inside, you can only change the order of the image, not the image itself. You can only alter what might have happened before, and what might happen afterwards. You can put on music from musicians that you like or musicians that you know. And all this may alter the invention, but the image itself remains there. In all its wilful ambiguity, its wildest invention, the image just goes on and on. Does he know this? Not so much perhaps, as a smile passes on his face, but there is some sort of recognition.

Up until recently one might have been excused for having the illusion that one could still write something about fashion without thinking of those pundits that appear in almost every other discipline. Up until recently we were spared their insight and tyranny, their blindness and delight.

Up until recently we had that glorious say anything space, captions from our own tormented lives, that delicious possibility of being wrong and right about something in the same breath. Not so anymore. Now we must tread lightly. An over-the-shoulder analysis of sometimes casual brilliance, sometimes turgid research tempts our own blindness, our own insights. Roland Barthes, Umberto Eco, Susan Sontag amongst others all commented on fashion. There is a loneliness in this that suits the fashion world: being wrong and right in the same breath.

Alaïa's fortunate ambiguity was getting through to me. The inhaling of illusions, of narcissism, of representation, the disqualifications of the neo-surreal-

ist, the charms of gentle velvet, the easy sado-masochist grain. Or, with a smile to René Magritte, everyone's express train coming through the hearth.

So far so good, someone whispers to me, as if halfway through the test I am told once more not to blow it. I put the camera away and take an espresso. How many realise the film has already started? Gentle obedience is difficult, obsequiousness is impossible. Upstairs before leaving the museum, I am given the press dossier on Alaïa: a thick, spiral bound collection of all the important, carefully edited press cuttings on himself and his work, plus a lavish collection of laser-colour copies of some of the main photographer's work. I leave for the hotel, the other corsetry and lacing show!

## LE JOUEUR

Back at the hotel and before leaving for the restaurant, I glance at the press dossier. Press dossiers seem to be a more insidious product after the 1980s than before. They make you public property. Not wanting to be as open or as accessible as they make out, the subjects of these dossiers become collected and collectible. In other words, these dossiers make their subjects fair game. And when you have become fair game, public property, what is left for you to do in the fashion world? Climb inside? Or carnivalize before they carnivalize you?

I began to think of Alaïa as the player, or in French, which may express it more accurately, *le joueur*. The dossier is full of Roland Barthes three categories. Fashion as worn, fashion as described, fashion as photographed. I have the feeling Alaïa himself puts these three expressions into continual play. His classic 'deconstructed' clothes can be worn, altered and made expensively suitable for anyone with the money and taste to need this. These clothes can obviously be photographed theatrically or minimally. Seduction depends on the attitude and approach of each photographer and the extent to which one exaggerates or plays down the line and cut of the clothes. It is line, not drape that defines Alaïa.

The additional detail hardly exists. The wit is no flourish, it is what is absent. The dress with strategic body parts worn by Naomi Campbell works because it leaves almost everything away. The bare necessities of fashion are naturally

the silhouette, the landscape. Nothing.

Yet in fashion the role of a photograph can collide with that of a critic; it 'relieves' the terrorism of a recognisable object. A pseudo-poetry of allegory can take over, trapping us by a loose seductive appeal to the meditative. A form of neo-Surrealism, attractive yet distant as the fashion within the frame is tampered with to resemble the "pose" of all photographs. Fashion is then a currency, blurred by rumour and craft, the vulgar and trivial as nebulous as the non-vulgar, non-trivial. If I am right and wrong about Alaïa at the same time, the ambiguity is both fortunate and despotic. Always asking us to reconstitute meaning and intention if for only a moment's honest peace with the image or photograph. Is this coded enjoyment or professional disgust?

If everything is so calculated, so orchestrated, is there nothing to go astray with such fashionable images? And if so, is there no longer any space left for us that is beyond fascination, beyond the planned image, beyond the seduction of a rather easy titillation?

The dossier prepares and treats every image as if it had nowhere else to escape to, as Barthes speaks of a photograph that can never escape the 'having-once-existed'. In the press dossier we are involved with impotence. It is an impotence that demands we stay outside the image or then strike up a bargain with the image it presents.

I try to meet the image of Alaïa presented through laser copies and text, to

avoid the failure and finitude of both image and text. How can one enter the photograph of the folds of the dress, the curve of the knee, the hub of the wheel, the bracelet without some agreed contract with affluence or aesthetics?

One soon realises that some of the world's photographers have also photographed Alaïa clothes: William Klein, Bruce Weber, Helmut Newton, Herb Ritts, Annie Leibovitz. Recently younger photographers have again carnivalized Alaïa without too much trouble; Jean-Paule Goode, Paolo Roversi, Peter Lindbergh and Dominique Isserman. Seductive, do we not always resist this seduction? Ultimately the fashion photograph invites us into a theatre of impotence and indifference. The attention to detail is precious. Leaving accident aside, the seduction is never allowed to question itself until it finds dubious ways to take itself more seriously.

Alaïa, like Dickens, takes himself less seriously to be taken more seriously. But on their own terms. I remembered thinking about compassion. It appears no longer to be a question of compassionate photography. In the trickery and pose of the fashion photograph, the question again returns: how and what to do with a compassionate response should we still discover ourselves capable of one? Still, after all these years, to recall that phrase from Susan Sontag, promoting or kidding the aesthetic of glamour. Prettier lies?

Then there's Alaïa's fashion as described. Rather limitingly, he seems to have got stuck with body-hugging rhetoric. Hierarchically this follows a pattern. Headlines either pun on his name *Oh La La Alaïa*, the Tunisian Takeover, or

then a short sharp and shocking description combining both, as in *The Titan of Tight* or *the King of Cling*. Mentally I make a note to list the headlines in the collected press dossier.

Ingresses in the texts and articles describe his skill and craft a little more. They mention the material used, like strips of elasticised rayon jersey with embroidered seashells. Or then they describe this craft as a triumph of intricate seaming. For anyone interested, as Barthes was, there is a heterogeneous study here of the language used about fashion and the conditions of success and failure; to analyse rigorously, formalistically, structurally and methodically. Perhaps in the fashion colleges of the world they are doing just that. But that's all gone. Erased. If so, Alaïa may already be history. Like Dickens!

Thematically the press dossier is broken down into tabloid themes: *A life in fashion*, *A style: The man who loves women*, *The Awards*, *World Coverage*, *The Favourite of the Stars*, *A 'sold out'*. The hype of all this suggests another paradox. I wonder why a designer, for whom we are told once more, Barney's in New York break every rule of delivery, needs this type of thing.

Needing to resist the fashion world necessitates one's own logic. Then it needs a critic or a journalist in attendance to write up this logic. Fashion doubtless victimises, and it is certainly destructive. Alaïa is probably right, designing for winter and summer is anachronistic. Accidentally, I begin to believe Alaïa has created his own inner logic. Detachment makes the only sense. It makes for increased struggle, increased envy in the fashion world. Ultimately, I wonder

if the destruction inherent in avoiding the motor of fashion greed, and the machine of the media, is not a self-destructive one.

I suddenly feel that this man may be fortunate to have survived so far and so long and not really become part of the machine. Equally this too is paradoxical, because the machine is necessary for Alaïa to be 'outside' that machine. There, with this dossier, with the selected details of a man's career through press cuttings, I felt fashion was inseparable from death. And with such a thought, I knew I had to stop. I could no longer envisage any appropriate way to proceed with this film.

## GOSSIP AND HAS-BEENS

In 1994 *The New Yorker* ran a long essay on Alaïa by Ingrid Sischy. Dotted thankfully with more insight than anecdote, there are some telling if obvious statements from Alaïa himself, especially about all the rumours in the fashion mill and the gossip of a 'has-been' Alaïa. "I don't care about any of that. As far as my work is concerned, it's always been the same. The struggles that obsess me are whether a sleeve fits properly, whether I have the length right, whether a fabric works in all the ways that it should. The challenge is how to make the clothes." As much as I admire the directness of the statement, I sense careful editing and another story entirely. But I also sense the impossibility of this story. For fame to remain, for a reputation to be made and then sustained, editing seems essential. Whole parts of Alaïa I feel have gone missing. Whole privacies, which he must share with those intimate, those alone, that keep him sane in this world, have gone.

In many ways I feel I have met a ghost, a person to whom talk is never cheap, but always part of an inside story. Again, I wondered what I was doing here. I suddenly felt increased boredom and indifference at taking this little camera and invading a life that would always remain distant. At what stage do you stop people playing with your own time, with your own goodwill?

To stop, not to make the film might have been the only option I had. An option, the press officer seemed to intimate to me, was no option at all. Was she right? Was it merely cowardice? A defence against inevitable difficulty? Or

disenchantment? How could I possibly finish a film I had never started?

With this cowardice in mind, I joined the others for the evening in the Muller Restaurant. I had had very little direct contact with Alaïa, and I expected even less in a restaurant. Everyone but the director (who would arrive later) and the coordinator (who arrived soon after me) were in place. Seated next to Carla I was thankful for a quiet place at the table to reflect.

I pursued my unease at being in this company by asking her some questions. I intimated my own fears and discomfort. He's the best, she said. The absolute top. He is the most-reputed designer in the world. And, she added again for effect, the best. I liked her charm, and I didn't doubt this, coming from a confidante who had known him since the 60s when - according to the dossier - he slept under his own designing table in Saint-Germain-des-Près and made impromptu shows in the kitchenette. But I also knew that in the fashion world it might be true; he might just be the best for some time. If so, how was I to understand this, how was I to be privy to this accolade? I'd be better off writing the unofficial, unfashionable biography!

## THE ABSENT ROSARY

It was not hard to imagine Alaïa's need for this external court, the people that surrounded him. It was a type of necessary filter from the impossible, impudent invasion of fashion. In the gestures he makes with his hands, in the grimaces and playful movements of the face that can lead an interviewer the wrong or right way, in the dancing eyes that have begun before the rest of the small body catches up, there was an inner language.

I imagined a richer inner speech that no one would ever know. Purely something of my own imagination, even hallucination, this would be an existence he would take with him to his grave, something that an intensive death would render triumphant.

I wondered if this intensity resisted the idea of explanation. Ambiguity, though denied, might be the very necessity of his success. Might it not lessen if not remove the need for cliché? No *mémoire*, no reference to the *classique et belle ville* of Tunis, no amount of philosophic posturing. The exhibition would show his clothes, would reveal the brilliance of cutting, shaping, stitching and finishing. It would reveal nothing else. Pure insolence! Alaïa's restless hands suggest the absence of a rosary. There is a dry feeling on them of sand. The dust of the pharaohs might not be quite so far back in history as we think.

This is also an operatic life, running like white sand through the fingers as they slip in and out of each other, impatient, yet calming. Possibly this allows

the eyes to remain mute. When all else is silent, that rarity in a famous person, the fingers do the talking.

For a man who must be cutting, drawing, patterning, steam-ironing, altering and pinning his clothes endlessly, to have the hands free for a moment must be disastrous. He grasps the cuffs of the black Chinese jacket, reminding me of my two year old daughter Princess Nadsumo with her favourite ragged blanket corner. She sucks it, places it, covers it and then thrusts it away, only for it to be returned when safety and security are needed again.

I have no evidence whatsoever for this playfulness and the interpretation I give it. I imagine it comes from a small Tunisian family, from a younger sister. Watching Alaïa in the restaurant, I thought I was watching a Truffaut character. A Truffaut child who had not grown up, but who had grown more than anyone else. Here was a character from a film who would meet death earlier than others and still be there to tell of it. A doomed creativity lay in this idea, and I was ashamed for thinking it. Imagine Jean Pierre Léaud in *Les 400 Cents Coups* or Oskar in Gunther Grass's *Tin Drum*.

This was Alaïa and I was beginning to warm to the man. I was warming to the impossibility of my task as much as I warmed to his impossibility. I was even warming to failing to make this film. Paradoxically, I needed this failure to continue.

He's seductive, Carla said. He's absolutely irresistible! She could have been

describing any charismatic figure from the 20th century but something about her told another story. I liked her and wanted to talk more with her. But at that moment his hands went up to his cheek, a cherub-manqué, his face turned. He knew he was being spoken about, and he sent a wordless message that this was alright.

Everyone around again took up their respective roles. These were not malicious or over-protective. Nor were they provocative. Everything had its order. In the presence of genius, of fame they say, people are prepared to sacrifice themselves and their own time beyond reasonable limits. This goes even as far as at one moment being praised, at another moment being the bane and the butt of anxious and tempestuous rage.

## A WORLD OF FASHION

I hadn't seen Alaïa's rage, I had only heard about the mood swings. I had enough of those myself. Eyes that danced like that whilst the body remained calm also had to fly. In the cherub, in the little prince, there was obsession, determination, insolence and ruthlessness. I wondered if I would ever be around when it happened, or whether the court filters out the little sultan's mood swings, and documentary films never get further than the introductory. Paradox upon paradox. The more I spoke the more I picked up the narrative.

In the mid-80s, 1984-1986 to be precise, Alaïa was on the verge of another stardom entirely. Before the likes of Versace and Armani had emerged as emperors of fashion, he had the position and chance to take himself to the stars. Within his grasp, Carla hinted, was the World of Fashion. This was Fashion with a definite capital F. At the top, respected, needing to do no more, but in fact needing to do everything once more but at a higher, greater, riskier plane. The money, the complete scenario, jet aeroplane, studded and jewelled dog bowls and private apartments in the world's greatest and glamorous cities.

Alaïa looks to have retreated. At least this is how it is interpreted. Suddenly my interest was tripled. Could this not have been a defence, his necessary solitude? And fear? I ask. The question is deflected by attention going on elsewhere. There is more banter and badinage. The excellent food is served with a flourish for the VIP guest. The guests at the table opposite begin staring at Alaïa. Their looks give the game away. They know this is someone famous,

but they can't quite place the face.

The maitre d' is called over. Discreetly the other table is informed who it is. My mind races. Could it be possible to pull the 'self' back from such worldly success? For fear of something bigger than ever imagined? Or for safety, for the security of the soul? And doing this in the terrifying knowledge that the persona then created becomes bigger than all that they can stand for, bigger than anything they can ever achieve.

Hallucination then must stand in for reality, life as one knows it is lost. But another life is gained, as it was for Glenn Gould. Fame is the second skin of fashion. It takes over and over-takes all. In other words, you could be out of control but on a world stage, in front of the world. How frightening, how utterly frightening! It would no longer be cowardice that pulls one back. Surely wisdom would play some part in this decision. Conscious or not, I wondered if a detachment, something between a hunch and wisdom warned Alaïa, in advance, to watch it coming. To see death ahead.

By so doing, by so 'retreating' - if this is how it is interpreted - then certainly Alaïa lost money, and a lot of it. No one outside the fashion world is likely to know just what such loss means, Carla said. But then no one outside the fashion world can know just what such gain is achieved by this retreat, this solitude within the world's ugliest and most beautiful virus. Dostoevsky was not too far away! What could I sense of such a decision in this designer's life? I had the strong feeling that you did not need to be on the inside of the fashion

world in all its seductive (deep) superficiality to realise that some decisions dictate and shape the sanity of the rest of your life. What direction Alaïa didn't take was key to his apparent calm.

How absurd! But there it was. I was imagining an inner calm at the end of the first day of meeting fame through the side door. Perhaps it's a trick of familiarity, the seductive pull, the charisma that everyone from Schnabel to Tina Turner seems to speak of when having met Alaïa. Was I about to play a trick on myself to make my own hallucination come true? To assume that you get on with someone like this, is then to imagine that the secrets of their existence, their real world, are for you, and only you, to discover.

Whatever was the case, I wasn't sure a film would do this. And if a film were attempted, then at the back of my mind was Eeyore replying to Pooh Bear's question, how long would it take to grow thin again to get out of the rabbit hole? Days, months, years. Who knows! Eeyore says in a low dulcet Disney growl. That's how I felt. By the end of the dinner, at two in the morning, I was expecting anything. No film, no contract, no money, no future. Days, months, years, who knows, who cares!

Instead, I was being asked when I could come to Paris and visit the Maison? When could I come to shoot Naomi (they all used first names) and Paolo (Roversi). It is not that things go fast in fashion, lack of speed anyway would kill it. No, it's just that fashion seems to know no other way of doing things. Who's afraid of fashion? There was no other pace than this instant, scary pressure.

Fashion moves on, anywhere but where it is. There is a passion in this impatience which may explain fashion more than any other discipline. I stepped onto the street to walk home with the feeling of the need to step aside, remain detached, however hallucinatory all this seemed.

## MARGINAL YET CENTRAL

The night no doubt had been long for others. Fortunately, this had been anticipated and it had been decided to meet only at 1'0 clock. This gave me time in the morning to read more and take a walk around the streets of Groeningen. Marginal yet central, part of the fashion machine yet not, I was prepared to believe Azzedine Alaïa was a genius, a magician, a sorcerer but whether this was important I had no idea. I could see the seduction, even brilliance of the 'little tailor', the charm and charisma. I could see the silence behind the eyes, the animated face and hands.

I could sense the ruthlessness, the insane edge when things got out of control, when deliveries were not made, when the industry demanded by fashion could no longer be kept at arm's length. I was prepared to believe Carla's words. But how was this to carry on into the world of film, of cinema, where there are any number of brilliant documentaries on fashion designers?

I recalled again Wenders' *Notebook on Cities and Clothes*. He didn't use the word 'fashion' in the title but spent the whole film discussing fashion's own detachment. He managed casually but carefully to string most of it together by playing pool with Yamamoto and discussing the relative classic truth of film and the accurate insinuation of video. Sharing Wenders' reluctance to get involved with fashion, seeing all this fashion business scroll past me like a bad music video, I felt I had nothing to go on and nothing more to offer. Not only that, I distrusted even Alaïa's own position in the fashion world confusing it with my own.

How could anyone from the imagined backstreets of Tunis making it in Paris, not find the Fashion World one huge game? How could one keep one's integrity? Was it necessary to construct a deliberate self-assurance? Had I come full circle and found Alaïa saying the same thing as the young pretender Alexander McQueen, in the *Inflight* magazine? The desert king moves over to the new boy from East London. Obviously fashionable, this sort of thing made good copy; to advertise the East End apprentice tailor's rise to stardom with in-your-face comments on fashion and the industry.

The more I read about Alaïa, the more I thought I understood the choice he must have made in those two crucial years 1985 and 1986. The years when he was as big as Grace Jones, Madonna and Tina Turner. But, and this is what made a visit to Paris and the *Maison Alaïa* interesting, how was I going to understand this choice? What sanity was achieved by not doing what he could have done? Why would someone who had never let himself be filmed intimately at work suddenly reveal this? Fashion made things move certainly, but in which way?

I couldn't imagine Alaïa speaking like Yamamoto on fashion, life and death. Did he not trust his own words, or did he see them fly too easily into the sand? To me I began to see these two designers as not so different. They were both dressmakers. Inside their discipline they were seductive moralists. Their visions were nostalgic and eternal, not timeless.

If only you could design time, Yamamoto says. Without an obvious sense of

humour, mischief and child-like originality, it was hard to see how the paradoxical silence and chatter within the fashion world is negotiated.

Alaïa wasn't strictly *haute couture*, or what I understood by that term. For his clothes were available and had been in stores around the world. Hadn't Alaïa borrowed from the street to take haute couture back onto the street? Yet fashion is haunted by haute couture. Being so privileged, so exclusive, haute couture demands no wider public responsibility. It has few demeaning dependencies. Perhaps this is what was meant when the claims are made that Alaïa began a whole new school of fashion.

The afternoon went quickly. Due to a clever misunderstanding at the dinner last night Alaïa, having toyed with the museum director in the French language, had got the director to agree to taking much more space in the gallery than was at first allocated to the show. The drama was comic. I remember sitting there eating and listening as this misunderstanding unfolded. This was a hoodwink. Asked whether the show could have all three floors the director, sensing a bluff, appeared to reply almost offhandedly, even ironically: why not? Realising the inflated, almost cheeky request, he must have felt the answer clearly signalled that this was too much. Yet he wanted to please. The space was not available. Alaïa joked and pushed him once more. Unable to decide further, the director insisted on saying again, "well yes, why not, why not also take the whole museum at the same time but..." Eventually the buts were amputated and by Sunday afternoon at 2.0'clock, the Alaïa show was on all floors in the museum.

If this was opportunism, then somebody somewhere had mastered it. This feigned communication was a signal also for my role to end. I was happy to be leaving and made my departure in torrential rain at 4'0 clock to take the train back to Schiphol. The train was calm and I began reading more of the Alaïa dossier.

In all the talking around fashion, I turned to silence and the sanctity of my own solitude. When considering artists there are, as far as I can see, two types in relation to silence. There are those who remain silent for fear of any explanation. Behind this may be a strong fear of being revealed, a fear ultimately perhaps of unworthiness, of thinness. Of being caught out. What is now called the Impostor Syndrome. And there are those artists who can afford, through their craft and art, to remain silent. The latter know that whatever misunderstandings are made, the work is strong enough to ride all ambiguity, all rumour, all gossip, all malice.

This is the void. It may not even need understanding as ambiguity and gossip, rumour and malice, all essential parts of fashion itself, gain greater strength and secrecy. It is shown, it exists. That's enough. This is the ecstasy of no further communication. To be explicit in most things is catastrophic. In fashion, it is suicidal. Alaïa seems one of the latter.

What can one add to the exquisite cutting, patterning, master tailoring, ironing and stitching that I would later film with the small camera in the Marais, without confusing this with the intimate insolence of fashion? There is no intellectual backdrop against which Alaïa was trying to portray the body as

idea, as desire. There is no text upon which his clothes as writing assumed levels other writing cannot. There is no desire outside the correctness of cloth and line. His clothes are what they are. Nothing else but a correctness – a truth also - in the way of doing something. The correctness a small boy might pick up from his mother’s body, the shape of her breasts when nestled and lodged in them at an age beyond that of a child.

Imagine what a relief it must be for the soul to be able to look, sit impassioned, burn within yet remain calm. To be able to allow the commerce of one’s close friends to provide the sanity in a world both consumed and consuming by the second. Fashion! And to be in turmoil within it? Turbulence! And to control it? Solitude! And to fail within it? Relief or shame?

Perhaps it is a mistake to use such a vague term as ‘fashion’ for Alaia. Sculpture, choreography, opera and architecture are all contained in his work. There is though, no scaffolding, no theatricality that need be applied to these invisible, wayward clothes and designs. Alaia is discipline and deep craft. Cut so close as to be invisible. A silhouette, like a landscape, is seamless; no one must know where the breast ends the shoulder begins, where the sand ends and the sky holds out. Pushing the sky away and then pulling it back in. Held at arm’s length to remain unknown. The genius is to allow the commerce of fashion and the necessity of journalism to raise it to an alchemy.

I had written down the last words Yamamoto said in Wenders’ film: “Generally speaking, I’m not interested in the future. I don’t believe in it. I don’t trust the future. I cannot make a commitment to tomorrow. Me, today, dragging my

past behind me...that's all I know. That's all I understand. To express it better. People living in the present are at a window between the past and the future. They try to balance their past and future selves. In my case I'd say I want to grow old fast. Finish it all quickly. For me, the only thing in store is the end. I don't foresee anything new starting in the future."

I wanted to imagine the wisdom in remaining quiet, in not having to say these words. Not because one does not think the same, but in not insinuating oneself in a world that has nothing but rumour from which to make the truth of your life. I was celebrating meeting a man who not only would not tell me anything more of his life, his craft, his fashion world, but of whom I felt I needed to know no more. Failure might not be an option anymore. It might be a necessity.

## TUNISIEN, MINISCULE, DIABOLIQUE?

On board SK 555 Amsterdam to Stockholm. This is where I came in. I take out the inflight magazine again. I have more time to read the piece on McQueen entitled *The Misfit*. All the words seem differently charged now, tinged with expectation and - even - a fake knowledge of this world. I forget how it is possible to film, to make this documentary and realise I was more interested in this first encounter with so called fame.

*Tunisien, minuscule, diabolique?* It would not be difficult to mime the journalist for the careful look, the carefully controlled rhetoric. It would not be difficult to write a convincing piece about the journey of the desert prince from Tunisia to Paris, via some of the world's most elegant women! Alaïa's journey would then come out looking not a lot unlike McQueen's.

Thrust into Givenchy to revive a flagging commerce, the way the journalist writes about McQueen begins to suggest how interchangeable all these words and lines are on fashion. Taut cutting at the bust, nipped waists, tiny snake-skin skirts, even the best commentator of Alaïa's work, the Herald Tribune journalist Suzy Menkes seems to applaud McQueen for doing what Alaïa had done; "a designer in control of himself...whose slim coats, sleek suits and dresses, were cut for a sexy powerful woman. The look was modern...and it was exciting to see a young designer take a flying leap in the right direction." The cycle seems to get smaller. Fashion is not only here and now, it is memory, it is reference and of course insolence.

Within another decade, will we find repetitions of this ever-modern, ever-revealing powerful woman and all the embedded bias against women? How many more descriptions of the modern can we take, until we too are asked to revive what we didn't see in the 1930s? If McQueen's cut can get any purer, then it must surely meet Alaïa? Nothing camp, nothing kitsch, nothing parodic except possible affinities with Balenciaga, Schiaparelli and Jacques Fath. Though what did I know about fashion that would not fit now on two post-cards?

You begin to see how journalism does it, how it recycles the fixed points, the slim biodata, all preference and bias that can be turned into copy. We have known areas, know individuals: Arletty, Tunisia, Naomi Campbell, César, Schnabel, Oum Kalsoum. This takes care of the story without penetrating further. It's a clever ruse. It allows the clothes to be more of a life-story than the life-story itself. The clothes themselves start keeping fashion at arm's length again. I begin to understand the subtlety of this solitude.

The most appropriate figure here is the Egyptian mummy. The body is swathed, wrapped, preserved, yet the folds of the cloth must remain as tight and as fixed as they can to the body. So close does this come to the silhouette as to make no difference between life and death. Except that is, for the shroud which is then the cloth. Come to life this shroud is a dress. Which perhaps explains better all the book cover blurbs. For Alaïa fashion is fate, fashion is destiny. It may be impossible to talk of a career, of a man who was a child-minder,

a cook, a dogsbody. Whilst on the side, in the margins of other people's aristocratic lives, he sewed their dreams together, he made their bodies fit more than they imagined clothes they never knew.

Looking from the plane, I imagined the music appropriate to a film. Of course, it could be *Arletty* or *Oum Kolsoum*. But more immediate to this world for me, were nursery *rhymes and songs from my own childhood*. *The Ugly Duckling*, *Little Red Monkey*, *The Three Billy Goat's Gruff*, *The King's New Clothes* and, especially *How much is that Doggy in the Window?*

How much is that doggy in the window? The one with the waggly tail. How much is that doggy in the window? I do hope that doggy's for sale. The plane hovered above Arlanda as it came into Stockholm. I was to return to my daughter, Princess Nadsumo. My wife Elisabeth had been keen for me to take on this film project on Alaïa. At least, she said, you could ask him to do a range for children. I laughed. It was a good a reason as any to make a film. And though I wouldn't dream of the familiarity in suggesting this to Alaïa, I knew what she meant.

But I did. Just before leaving, Alaïa had signed a photograph of Princess Nadsumo with a ballpoint pen. The pen wouldn't write on the paper surface. His name had come out and yet had not remained on the photograph. I took it out of the journal I was writing this in. Like braille, all I could make out now were the depressions made by a pen. A fashion designer, I thought, may be like an actor. Always about to step onstage but enjoying the moments off more and

more. Like a ballpoint pen on a satin surface. Did I pass the test, I ask myself, waiting for the bags from the luggage belt? Possibly. It was discussed before Alaïa had signed the photograph, before we had run for the train in Groeningen that I must, absolutely must, the coordinator had repeated, be in Paris next week. To shoot Naomi and Paolo!

Then to New York to shoot Stephanie (Seymour). And why not to Italy, to see the laboratory where the materials are experimented and manufactured. Three days and I had got used to statements like this thrown out meaning very little, promising even less. Statements about and to people on first name terms who are not on first name terms. Statements about schedules that can only fit the flighty and famous like Ms. Campbell. I nodded. Paris? Yes. New York? Next week. Yes. Let's see. Why not? I knew I would be flying Concord before any of this happened.

Before departing I was given instructions how to get into the Maison and which entrance to take; not off *Rue de Verrerie* but *Rue de Moussy* near *Rue des Mauvais Garçons*. And how they would love the coincidence of that street name at the film production meeting. The Naughty Boys Street! Bad Boy Street. It meant for me a return to an earlier life. To a time when I walked the streets of the Marais. I liked the sound of so much; *Rue Bourg de Tibourg* and *Rue Croix de la Bretonnière*. Streets not far from *Rue Vielle du Temple* where I lived briefly some twenty years back. The time it seems a young gawky teenage Ms Campbell was learning how to model with her 'papa' Az'dine.

It was impressive to look with what professionalism yet lightness all around that museum room were taking the plans for the exhibition. The scale of it got bigger as the coffee got drunk. The cakes were eaten, the nibbles were nibbled, and the mineral water lost its fizz. Money seemed no problem and the sponsors were all but assumed on board. It takes one telephone call, the coordinator said, one telephone call and continued to fidget with his dreadlocks. With his charm and enthusiasm, you couldn't imagine it failing.

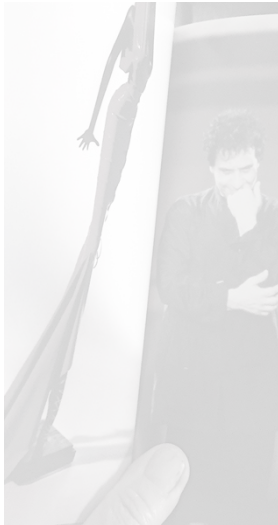
No other point but to aim for the top. No surprise shown by this hyper-activity, which is as it always will be in fashion. But who will be there I thought? Who really will come? And we can show your film along with *The Bruce*, I was told. No? You've never seen Bruce's film? Marvellous. Wonderful. You'll absolutely love it. It was planned that I arrive on Friday 20th latest. No one talked of money, of a script, of an idea, of a purpose. What Alaïa said somewhere made me think of him as an *underliner*: I prefer the woman to be seen rather than the outfit. Her head, her body, her hands - the garment is there to cover her, underline something, and make her beautiful. All I remember is going to the station in the pouring rain. We had to borrow an umbrella from the museum café's kitchen. The coordinator borrowed it from the beautiful young waiter with Chinese and Latin features. The same waiter who had the gall and the balls, I assume, to ask Monsieur Alaïa for his autograph.

Alaïa had twinkled, like the little star up there in his own firmament. I was happy to have met this man. I was happy when my bags arrived. Yes, I'd love Bruce's film! Surely, he could do this one too. I was convinced he'd do it. Such

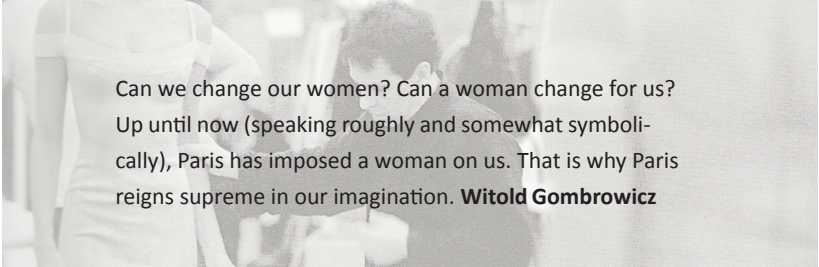
a nice guy. You'll love him! Fashion was a wonderland, a fairy tale world. Nothing to be afraid of? The nursery rhyme was more appropriate than the *musique populaire tunisienne*.

Wear you a hat, or wear you a crown, all that goes up must surely come down. I was certain nothing of this would happen, nothing of this had ever happened. As I got through the door, my wife and my daughter Princess Nadsumo wondered why Papa, director of three extremely modest videos and certainly not the director of a forthcoming documentary film on Azzedine Alaïa, was laughing.









Can we change our women? Can a woman change for us?  
Up until now (speaking roughly and somewhat symboli-  
cally), Paris has imposed a woman on us. That is why Paris  
reigns supreme in our imagination. **Witold Gombrowicz**

2

LE JOUEUR



## I AM FASHION

We are now out of time, out of fashion. The woman has to be re-written, she has to take these pages back and these designs for herself. "I should like to suggest that at least on the face of it a stroke-by-stroke story of a copulation is exactly as absurd as a chew by chew account of the consumption of a chicken wing." So wrote William Gass in his philosophical enquiry *On Being Blue*. *Who's afraid of fashion?* Everyone it seemed, because no one could ever make up their mind. Not least the 'little master'!

It's late 1997 and I am again on the trail of the small Tunisian designer who became, it is said, one of the most famous haute couturiers of the 1980s. It is written somewhere that Azzedine Alaïa is one of the foremost, innovative, exciting and visionary designers working in fashion today. Apparently for over twenty years this Tunisian's innovative fabrics and form-hugging dresses have bedecked the bodies of some of the world's most beguiling women. The language suddenly becomes suspicious; there is a creeping bias that tells us this is a story of the last century not this.

The list is impressive to some, probably men, but of little interest I realise to me: Farida Khelfa, Tina Turner, Beatrice Dalle, Glenn Close, Madonna, Naomi Campbell and Heidi Fleiss. Mimicked but impossible to copy, it has always been felt that his signature is perfection. How, if I was to film, was I supposed to capture this perfection? Glamour with a capital G, they call it. How was I supposed to add to the glamour of fashion?

Was it not glamour that made everyone afraid of fashion? Someone had writ-

ten that 1997 would be an extraordinary year in the history of this designer. Somewhere else, doubtless to further the enigma of the man they relentlessly called the 'little master', John Galliano had said 'Dior was Alaïa before Alaïa was Alaïa'. Was that not enough to make one afraid of fashion if not the fashion world?

The tabloids here in Helsinki have a story about Naomi Campbell; the woman who refers to Monsieur Alaïa as 'papa'. Apparently, she has taken an overdose of sleeping tablets on account of her Spanish boyfriend. She is in intensive care. I imagine this is why the shooting is off on Friday. Or is it that no one has actually discussed any script or filming. Bruce Weber I am told again would charge 100K US. Never con amore, pro bono!

Too late to cancel the ticket. I am shooting an ad for 8 mobile phones in Helsinki. The money gained for directing this large camera will of course pay for the small camera. A personal contract. I accepted the cameraman would make most decisions knowing we could frame the ad in the editing studio.

I was thinking of driving to Oslo, a long slow road trip to eternity that you get in Scandinavia, through forest, fjord, lake and a chilled landscape. Where nothing exists before, nothing exists after; except a series of locations for a Scandi-noir thriller.

The story of the overdose was rubbish. "She is not the type to suffer over love", her agent from the Elite modelling agency says. Apparently, the super-model had turned singer and was trying to do a duet with Jon Bon Jovi. The

Human League hit: *Don't You Want Me?* Most seemed to agree: the choice of song was more than ironic. It's much ado about nothing, the agent says. The proof is that she is not in hospital.

On the cruise ship between Helsinki and Stockholm, I meet 4 lads from Northern England. One of them wants to look at the paper with the story about Naomi C. We later got talking. They were ticket touts, black marketeers. They claimed to know Liam, that was until he fell out with Noel. All this seemed as believable as me using a small Sony Digital camera to shoot Naomi Campbell.

So what are you doing, what are you into? The one called Mitch asked. I thought answering by using the word 'fashion' would be the easiest way out of any further enquiry. "Oh, I love fashion," Mitch said, "I've got great clothes at home. This is just my work get-up. I've got all the looks. Comme des Garçons, Paul Smith, Versace, Yoji Yamamoto, I love him. And Prada. Love Prada. How did you get into this line?"



## DON'T LOOK BACK

I couldn't stop him. "Just tell me. Where you want to go? I'll get you tickets. *Oasis*, *U2*, *REM*, *The Manics*. Name it. Anything. Give me a call. Let me know." Opera, I said, I listen to a lot of Opera. I thought this would end it and return them to what they were originally discussing. Their love for Manchester City Football Club. "Floyd," Mitch said, "I listen to a lot of Pink Floyd. You must know them!" I thought. No leave it. Autumn 1968 Bristol University, Pink Floyd performing at the students' union.

Was I sure these things had happened? Was this already a past life? The question then turned to the cigar I was smoking. Must be heavy duty, they said. So strong man! It wasn't that Alaïa was reluctant to speak about his work, his life, his self. What had that got to do with anything? Why this need to explain things away? Mitch is not fashion, Alaïa is not fashion. I am not fashion.

The less likely this film was going to happen the more interested I got in everything residual to this madness and everything that surrounded the 'little Tunisian tailor'. At the beginning he had to be Monsieur Alaïa, and far too presumptuous of me to think by the end of this debacle to address him as Azzedine. Or *Az-dine*. Forget any psychological affinities, where his inner soul escapes, where his solitude is one of guilt, loss and nostalgia. Find the desert to lose the desert. What was it like to find himself in Paris without work as a young kid, fresh from Tunisia like coffee? From this side of the fjord, I look straight down toward Oslo. I had finished installing the exhibition called *Aal-tomania* at a gallery in Moss.

I was supposed to call Amsterdam to confirm whether I am going to Paris next week, to shoot a film in the Maison Alaïa in the Marais. I had tried all day without luck and had now come to the edge of the sea for a better reception. It was evening and I found an upturned boat. I sat and before trying once more I took in the solitude of the landscape. The sun was low, ready to eclipse another day; the slow, never-quite-darkness had more than a welcome in its gentleness.

I reached Amsterdam and laughed immediately I finished the call. I was told we should re-confirm what we have already confirmed about the film. "The projects bound to be like that," the coordinator said over the phone, "if it involves people like Alaïa, Naomi and Paolo. Carla is coming from Milan for the shoot and definitely, this time, Naomi has promised to drop in." He spoke as if he had not said this before, as if only he knew the secrets of fashion's fickleness. Sometimes he spoke as if he could unravel cancellations, heartache and disappointment. Jim, you see, was cool with fashion!

## COOL WITH FASHION?

I had heard all this a hundred times before and reached down to pick up a stone. I skimmed it across the sea. Five times! I could settle myself for anything. When you are not the real filmmaker of the film you are not supposed to be making, anything was possible. You might be in Paris next week. Or, at home in Stockholm. I realised I had only seen my daughter Princess Nadzumo for two hours in the last week. So secretly I was hoping the fickleness of fashion would postpone the shooting once more. In fact, I was looking forward to a few days playing with a rapidly expanding collection of toy lizards rather than rushing to Paris and sweating over the filming of Naomi Campbell with a small micky mouse digital camera.

Of course, none of this could ever be according to my schedule. That is one of the given rules of fashion. It is never to your own schedule unless you are fashion itself. Was that not the reason why the designers, the models, the photographers all remained ambiguous? It was impossible to announce you would be 'there' in New York if, as was likely, the place to be was instead, Paris, or Milan. Venues and events changed just as they did with raves in the 1990s. You were never where you shouldn't be, which meant you were always available to go where you should be. And a failure to be photographed 'there' where you should be, meant you would soon be where you shouldn't be.

So much nonsense! To be temperamental was a strategy useful to retain such edge. To imagine the end of imagination in fashion is to imagine oneself with-

out friends. And yet in fashion you can never be taken so seriously that you lose friends. Then afraid of fashion itself, you would be outside fashion.

Being outside fashion was equal to being dead. It was another solitude you make for yourself. At least that's what I had come to understand so far. And the most expensive supermodel in the world may be playing hard to get with a Spanish dancer, but she was hardly going to put off shooting to allow me to play with my daughter's collection of toy lizards. As I finished the conversation on the mobile phone, I noticed three young Norwegians getting out of the sea. They dried themselves off and made for their cars. 'Warm or cold?' I asked. 'Damn cold!' one of them replied.

I was dreading the possibility of leaving directly from Oslo to Helsinki and then to Paris to find it all postponed on arrival. More contracts needed organising. This was a good sign as not a single contract had been drafted or discussed and certainly not signed. Mr Alaïa and the photographer (Paolo R) prefer the 10th. Or was it the 12th? What this has to do with me is anyone's guess in this world of the bold and beautiful. The exhibition on Finnish glass in Moss had been effective, but response was slow. Talk of further shows at Stavanger, Bergen, Copenhagen, Stockholm, Paris and Essen. It wouldn't happen. The post-opening party on board a converted 'Lowestoft' fishing vessel had become memory.

## BLACK SCREEN

Time disrupts itself. I imagine a black screen. The word ALAÏA written on it. Suddenly the image changes to a small man dressed all in loose black, sitting at a large table with a white cat. I imagine a narrator speaking quietly: "There's nothing outside fashion. This film can be nothing but a commentary, a confession. I was the wrong person from the very beginning. And I knew it." I was going to end this film, called *A Pistol and a Parrot*, with a sequence of Monsieur Alaïa in Paris in the Marais, at work at his large table surrounded by the tools of his métier. The two French curves, known (in French) as a *pistolet* would be seen along with a *parrot*. I am not sure why. The white chalk which is no longer white would occasionally be picked up. Similarly, the yarn, the ruler, and the black spectacles necessary for magnifying the thread. Alaïa would be there with one of his cats. With a bit of luck, it would be the white one. I knew I couldn't plan the pose or the event. Yet if I could get it, I thought it would make an excellent ending. Enough of a pose in Monsieur Alaïa. Enough of a sense of mischief in the cat about to spring.

All that was before, for some inexplicable reason, Monsieur Alaïa lost interest in the film, just as I too had lost interest in filming. And though that left both of us indifferent to the meddlesome interference of the entourage and this little digital camera, no one thought of telling it to stop. Until it was too late! Fashion is constant expectation and postponement. Always in every seduction, there is resistance. There had to be for us to get carried away by such triviality.

## FADE TO BLACK

Open on: *Sc. Ext. Paris. Canal St. Martin.* Morning; a tourist boat called *Arletty* is negotiating the lock. It is very likely that I will not make this film now. It is possible that all the material shot so far must remain unseen. I do not understand this, but I have been informed that I may face problems. I decided thereupon to take legal advice. It seems that having previously been invited into the *maison* of this remarkable fashion designer, having filmed with a small camera without attempting to hide anything, it seems I am doing nothing illegal if I show my own material. Legally then, in fact, there is no reason why the film cannot go ahead. I agree with this.

How many times has someone asked me to do something at my own risk, using my own time, only not to honour that risk? No money passed hands, nothing was signed, the Groninger Museum that first talked of commissioning the film remained ambiguous throughout. There is then no reason not to express my view. It's not that I felt cheated, far from it. I enjoyed visiting the *Maison* in Paris where stars and starlets drop by to borrow a gown for the evening. I enjoyed drinking afternoon tea from an elegantly heavy cast iron Chinese tea pot, as wide as the gossip always was. I enjoyed intimate lunches and the careful humour.

Determined once again not to see yet one more project sink because of lack of interest, I decided to make the film that couldn't be made. Of course, it had to be said from the very beginning, I was never the right person for this film. I never claimed to be.

It is also possible that for a fashion designer of such stature, this modest interfering notebook shot awkwardly with a Hi-8 camera and a Digital Handicam does not quite stand up to the vision required for this film. Be that as it may and with no further likelihood that this film will ever be made, I and the little camera have decided to continue.

I am now on board an SAS flight to Paris for a second three-day filming session at the maison of Azzedine Alaïa. I feel, though I have met the man before, that I must learn again to know him, to film him, to speak to him. How do I know already that it is too late?

## BACK TO BLACK

I am not a filmmaker. I am someone with a small camera, someone interested to look in places which are less familiar. This does not mean I am a spy. I have no desire to seek more ambiguity or more confusion by filming things or events that only add to this ambiguity or confusion. I am not particularly interested in fashion. Before beginning this film, I already suspected the fear, the intrigue and duplicity. It needed me like it needed a hole in the head. Nor was I particularly interested in the subject of this film; a Tunisian-born fashion designer called Azzedine Alaïa. Only later I learnt to pronounce it correctly as Az'dine. But by then he'd given a part of himself only to try and take it away again.

I was, and still am, interested in the man of course. His craft, his innovation, his métier. In fact, half-way through this film you'll realise that I would rather have written a book about him than made this film. Most of all, however, I was interested in what I thought of, rather ignorantly, as the *solitude of fashion*. How was it possible to remain sane in such a world as fashion, without building this solitude deliberately, without surrounding oneself with a court, without being filmed and then deny that filming? And for me, how was I to abandon my own solitude without, in the Tao manner, following two courses at once? Eventually my small digital camera became more interested in the filming than I was. It would be fair to say, it continued filming long after I had lost interest. And like fashion, it too needed me like a hole in the head. That made two holes in the head. And Monsieur Alaïa, *le joueur*, the jester, the magician,

the alchemist from this side of the desert? Well, he too needed me as much as he needed a hole in the head. This I was to find out. But by then it was too late. That made three holes in the head.

## RUE DE MOUSSEY

It was Thursday morning. I had arrived in Paris the evening before. We had talked over the film. We were to go to the Maison mid-morning to proceed with the film, just as we had done some months earlier. This time it was near show time. Packaging and panicking seemed to be the order of the day. The first telephone call should have warned us. Apparently Mr. Alaïa had pretended not to know of the filming and put us on hold. This was hard to believe as it had all been checked but we were prepared to wait. By 11.00 clock we were in the street near Rue de Moussey on the way to the Maison when we noticed Max, Mr. Alaïa's PR speaking into his mobile phone. He greeted us, ended his conversation, suggested we come immediately and then suddenly said: "No, better leave it. Wait half an hour!" We agreed. I gave him a bottle of vodka for Mr Alaïa and we then made our way over to BHV, where PP searched for a book he wanted and I found the compact disc of *Les Parapluis de Cherbourg*.

At the cashier in BHV, PP's mobile went. It was Max. "Don't come yet. I'll call you at 3'0 clock." Suddenly half the day had disappeared within fifteen minutes. We left BHV and walked *towards Rue Vielle du Temple*. The mobile went again. "Don't come today. We'll shoot tomorrow and Saturday." No explanation, a trace of panic. I was relieved. Suddenly the control, the caution with which Mr Alaïa was in control but out of control sent renewed calm through me. I was almost pleased to be given back the day, to be relieved from yet another day in an intolerable world. We tried to get into the *Videoteque* in Les Halles. It was 12.05. The security guard indicated that it was closed until 1300.

Outside a small notice was taped to a pillar. “Fast, cheap and out of control.” We joked about eating first, cinema later. We laughed so much that the guard had to come out and put us right. The film had been on yesterday. It wasn’t difficult to see how we continually keep missing the point of each other’s concern. The guard was mystified as we left, still laughing. We went for lunch at Le Cheval de Feu on *Rue Vieille du Temple*.

Huddled in the backroom over steak tartare, I told PP, my friend and producer, that this film seemed impossible to make. This paradoxically, he reminded me, was the idea of the very first script I had written. Without knowing Mr Alaïa, I had felt his character, his person, his unpredictability and his self-confirming mystery would always prove more interesting than his achievement in fashion. Perhaps that is what happens to all great characters in the fashion world, as we begin to see their achievements through their own anxiety and obsessions. Born, worked and (not yet) died.

PAS DE BRIE, MONSIEUR!

The American at the next table for some reason asked for brie in his sandwich. The waiter replied in French, *Pas de Brie, monsieur*. The American continued to ask in English: Brie, brie in the sandwich. *Pas de Brie Monsieur, Camembert!* That's what I meant. As the American started to spread USA today across at least two tables, the waiter winked at us whilst rudely and elegantly invading the American to insert a knife and fork somewhere beneath his newspaper.

Later that evening we had dinner in *Chartier* and discussed what we might shoot tomorrow. That is if we are allowed in, I said. Sure, we'll be allowed in, PP replied. I wasn't so sure. I'm ok with it either way, I told him. I'd stop tomorrow if he prevented us. We spent the rest of the evening punning lamely on Az'dine. az-tonishing, az-trocious, az-easy az... it amused us, deflected our annoyance or rather surprise at what we, ignorant of the fashion world and its need for protection, saw as petulance. I should have avoided the snails.

The next day began like the last. I had vomited at three in the morning. All the steak tartare from *Cheval de Feu* and the snails from *Chartier* must have re-emerged. PP heard none of it despite the room being tiny. Late up, over cafe au lait in *Cheval de Feu*, we begin analysing the silence. I had this theory that Mr Alaïa knew nothing of the shooting. He might even know nothing of the film. I explained this to PP in the following way. Perhaps Mr Alaïa held his own staff in such terror with mood swings of creativity and melancholia, that no one returns telephone calls.

Messages which were supposed to be passed on, could quite conceivably not - in fact - have been passed on. For fear of interruption! I'd heard of architects and other big fashion designers who work like this.

Tyrannised by creativity, oblivious to the gossip and rhythm of the world elsewhere, their own staff begin to filter out what they consider unnecessary interruptions. Soon of course, this means the staff begin doing the thinking for their masters.

It dawned on us that they might not even have told Mr Alaïa that I had flown to Paris from Sweden to do some filming. Perhaps with all the rush about the exhibition and the sultan's new collection, in their collective fear at an almighty outburst, the staff were all waiting for an appropriate moment of lightness to tell the master. Maybe that moment never came. And here we are blaming him, PP replied.

## C'EST VICIEUX!

I agree with Mr Alaïa, the camera is vicious. It invades, zooms in and fragments anything you feel worth keeping complete. We talk. Actually, he talks I listen. He tells the story of Vittorio de Sica filming with Joan Crawford. The director made the mistake of saying 'cut'. Later at dinner, Ms Crawford explained to the director. You may film all you like. But it's me who says 'cut'!

Fashion is relentless. It can be vicious. I agree with my camera. I am glad it is so small, so digital, so relentless, so untrustworthy. In all this filming that is taking place 'silently' everything is rendered neutral, flattened as it is by the gossip of the day in the House of Alaïa, and by the easy tears that flow behind screens and mirrors. I agree with the 'master'. You can film all you like, but it's me who says 'cut'! Actually, it is not. The little devil camera just goes on and on, recording as he speaks. Indifferent not to Monsieur Alaïa; *ce n'est pas vicieux, c'est merveilleux.*

It seemed after the Joan Crawford story that some sort of acceptance was registered. It brought out some humour in him. He referred to me as Mr Indiscretion in response to the viciousness of the camera's eye. I began to think it possible that my own diffidence and calmness made me more discreet than ever. To observe his cutting, marking, drawing, patterning became magical. How he used the French curves in real time in front of me became hypnotic. Head down, large pair of spectacles, intense study in black. If I didn't have any documentary to make, I would have happily sat there for hours, watching

garments and models enter and leave, watching the parrot or the pistol, those French Curves.

Later one of his assistants took me aside. “You know, no one has done this, no one had ever been allowed to sit as you are. It can’t last. You are getting too close.” There was a human delight to be allowed into someone else’s work and be trusted. The intimacy he offered me would for a while remove all gossip, all malice and envy some had towards Alaïa. Outside the court, the fashion, the exaggeration, the House of Alaïa began to be above all, human.

Above all! How could I film with more intelligence to this world than I had? How could I hold back on images which were running away from me? Surely it was all self-explanatory. When a millimetre needed taking away, he would feel it between his fingers, he would feel it on the model, this time with Melissa, and he would then turn back to the craft paper or the card and amend it. It was a thrilling precision. Witness without presence.

## FASHION IS AN ASTERISK

There was a jester within. It offered comfort where difficulty was faced daily from unreasonable quarters. Some no doubt thought friendship offered membership to career, fame and fashion. But the levels of trust go further than this. To be allowed into those secrets of this labour is a responsibility than cannot always be controlled. This is not written in film, written in images. The tenderness of such labour is beyond the words shared in French or English it is somewhere in the silence of watching an evening's work alone in the studio. Days could be intense.

An afternoon of comings and goings, of models, deliveries, visitors and assistants; Alaïa remains working throughout all, head down. Sometimes acknowledging the visitor, sometimes allowing others to deal with them. There is much good-natured banter and laughter back and forth to the table. Arabic, French, English, Italian. Versace or Armani comes up. Whenever such a name emerges there is an invited carnival of pantomime stories. But this time Versace. An organised assassin, or a lone killer? Theories go back and forth.

There is a loyalty in the codes respected and those necessary to maintain this nuanced ambience. People catch themselves looking around as if they are being watched. The hierarchy is embedded in the veiled silence. But it breathes. He loves people. He loves New York. She loves intimacy. She loves him. Hands up and around shoulders. Images from all the famous photographers. He dresses her. Nothing is out of place, ever.

The giggling is feverish and forestalls arrogance. There is even the possibility of a wayward, naughty vocabulary, shared with hand to mouth. Tits, asshole, the breast and the asterisk. Giggles, tipples, this god of fashion holds the clips of others. When the word 'cool' had not even reached the Keywords Dictionary of Fashion, Alaïa was cool. Galliano knew so. And childhood is part of that hysterical, unforgettable 'saharienne', somewhere between a comma and a full stop. When fashion is an asterisk, all is open, tears are easy. Everyone queues up to be on the arm of the prince, the little sultan. Finally, the asterisk says, as it walks along *Rue St Honoré*, I feel safe in Tunis, in Morocco, in Tangiers, or New York and slowly without revenge, the asterisk becomes a top model, a profession, and stars in a film that looks as if it as all meant to be like this.

## THE CAMERA IS NOT REQUIRED

You think the filming can show the working man? Certainly, by the way the hands are moving to their own rhythm, the detail is thrilling. But try telling the camera that. Try telling the camera than when a cat jumps up onto the drafting table, the heart lifts in this man and a fragment of thread is momentarily disturbed, the line goes off. Then a stitch of yellow or red thread makes its way across what seems a vast desert.

You think the camera gets close enough to be amicable, to joke, to play the jester, you are wrong again. It has no history, knows no clothes or garments or the language used about itself. It recognises no seduction. It is sand.

You think the camera has enjoyed this? You think it enjoys being so vicious? Nothing in this is thrown out, uncared for, unpractised. He lifts his eyes above the large spectacles. Just that look is held for the moment the cat walks away from the pattern. Can a stray image kill? As a word in the bazaar can be used indiscriminately by the unthinking tongue.

Suddenly what we thought as bizarre and peculiar became completely different. We needed to change our partial view, upset any conditioned opinion. It was entirely conceivable to me that Mr Alaïa had no real knowledge of this film at all. Perhaps no one told him it would continue, the camera would turn silently. Later I would realise that no one had actually shown him the rough scripts, or even thought it worth disturbing him with the idea of a script. This

was the only explanation for the increasing silence.

As with all geniuses, only those close and sometimes blind, witness their unreasonableness. We preferred, still, to give Mr Alaïa the benefit of the doubt. This was of course laughable. We were in no position at all to give Mr Alaïa a second chance. What arrogance indeed for us even to think that! By mid-morning, with no telephone call on the second day and no one returning PP's calls, it sunk in. We do not exist. There is no film. I am not in Paris. I was not in Paris some months ago in the same place. The camera is not required.

This intimacy which has been offered, whichever interpretation made, is empowering. Later I begin to realise as if I didn't already know this. Fashion cannot invite you in. If you want to compose your life for others to compose it, it becomes essential not to talk too much. Memory is made up of ambiguous and precise lies at the same time. It really depends on who tells the anecdote and who pulls the strings. I was convinced a spot of Tao was necessary to negotiate our disappointments. Just as when we speak of limits, we remain confined to limited things, so the expectation of fashion produced both renewal and decay. My will to film this film had become aimless some weeks ago, long before this moment. But it was this moment when I recognised this aimlessness. We delimit and enjoy this stage.

Fast, cheap and out of control. Suddenly the film was freed of all expectation because of what Mr Alaïa was doing or then not doing, because of his being or his non-being. Just the right amount of Tao and not a drop more. Some

suspect an illness. Where does such rumour come from? The photographs are removed and gathered together near the antique dresser. Now the photographs remain in the dresser along with the special silver. When he goes will the photographs be brought out? As if death is a taste we can return to?

## THE ALAÏA DOGS

If you heard me speak in the House of Alaïa, you'd swear I'd not recognise the champagne as it meets the orange, touched off with an expensive cognac. You'd swear that I got lost somewhere on the way from adolescence to adulthood. You'd be right up to a point. But then you'd catch me whistling, that blue collar memory to a lost father's family. You'd guess precisely that I really do not know that the champagne as it meets the orange juice, and the cognac was a drink for young gentlemen at Cambridge. You'd be right again up to a point. And as I opened my mouth ever so occasionally to address someone many referred to as a genius, you'd catch not the history of the desert in my voice, but the railway sidings and the coal dust lodged in the knee when fleeing the guard after destroying a signal box. With Monsieur Alaïa, I'd no need to talk a good game, I could let the camera do the talking. In fact, you'd not hear me speak.

Walking home in the Marais that evening we, the producer PP and myself, notice two giant turds near the Alaïa office. We knew then that the huge dogs had been taken out for a walk. We call these *tandoori* turds on account of their colour. We pass Roger, the North African dog-walker from the Maison on his return. We say Good Evening. He returns the greeting but wonders where we are from. The dogs make no recollection of the camera as the saliva drops and they continue to take Roger for a walk. I have my camera with me, so PP says why don't you just film the windows. Unconvinced, I take my camera and point it at the windows. We do not realize how desperate we are.

Three men amble around, like bodyguards. One of them looks over and I imagine a smashed nose. I lower the camera and film the wet pavement, anything. Up and down the lights go. But he's not interested in us. He leaves to go into that other Blue Boy Bar at the end of the street. The camera continues filming Mr. Alaia's windows like empty sockets in a skull.

We are led to imagine the frustrations of a court just as it might have been in the past of Royalty. The King. The Desert. The Mirror. The necessity of flattery no longer surprises us. Perhaps it never should have surprised us. From here onwards we begin discussing things without any further infuriation. We are free. In fact, we are speculating, spinning fictions from the impossible action of others which we will never be able to confirm. We are left with no other choice. Do we finish the film or not?

Ask the camera. Do I film more? Ask the camera. Do I request to film the intimate lunches in the tiny kitchen where the 'tartar' is most human? Ask the camera. Or do I turn the intrusive camera into the small room behind, where the seamstresses work, waiting for the second sitting for lunch? Ask the camera. No! Nothing of it seems necessary anymore. We decide to turn up at the exhibition some weeks later. The camera will film the dresses, the materials and those 'fabulous inventions' of his for 20 years. If I am lucky, I will still have enough material for a film of 30 minutes. It will of course be nothing like the film I started. But I will be relieved. I will have been saved any further embarrassment and intimacy with an impossible world. I invent idiotically as

a way of remaining invisible, of taking back the content of these images.

Will we lose our images? Will we get no permission to use the images already shot? It no longer interests me. Fashion surely is never big enough that it needs everyone. Suddenly there is an ecstasy in this fatigue. We take a late afternoon beer in Quigley's near Les Halles. The South African barman gives us the etymology of the word 'wus'. We celebrate our freedom. Fashion can keep its own images. We want nothing more of them.

## INSTITUT DU MONDE ARABE

It seemed appropriate to visit the Arab World Institute by the architect Jean Nouvel in *Rue des Fossés Saint Bernard*. I'd visited earlier when living for a short time in the Marais. Opening towards *Île de la Cité*, a metallic screen unfolds with intricate geometric motifs. The photo-sensitive façade with its 240 motor-controlled aperture system is a *bris soleil* responding to the amount of light and heat entering. This control and the patterning it creates behind its veil seems made for Alaïa.

I read the surfaces for Alaïa's invention; the pink and white check Tati patterning, the tattoo motifs, the zipper and black knitwear, the intricate stitching all seem to be written across this building. The bandage and even the paintings of Cy Twombly and the sculptures of Picasso and César seems scripted in the Marais and acted out here. Stature, silhouette and stiletto. Any chink in pattern and peek allows the sunlight to pass, only to be met with another surface, another level, another layer. Arabic overtones, or perhaps undertones.

In the Institute bookshop, I check out the small Folio volumes as I always do in French bookshops. I pick up two volumes which I intuitively think will help. Andre Gide's *Amyntas* and Albert Memmi's *Le Désert*. In these books there is something about camouflage that is invited into my understanding of Alaïa; the grand couture of the metal leaf shot through manikin and sheepskin. Openings in book and building are fingered, the corsetry tapered and thinned for the waistline architecture and the body. Islamic dissolve of light

and filter; the apertures are closing as they open, the subject dissolved in the pages I turned.

## THE PERFUME OF TRUST

The Courtiers sit. They attempt no dialogue with the Master unless spoken to. It seems they are pleased with the snippets, the occasional glance or the words thrown in their direction. I find this essential for gaming the Alaïa show. Hushed respect, inner curiosity only, but not mute. They have a life outside Alaïa too. There is a freedom offered, emotional and challenging as long as it is not overstepped. Wherever that line is, the boundary is unspoken. Advisors, assistants, helpers and the stray; this provides a setting for 'play'.

I sense the vulnerability that is masked by this. The inside supports the outside of the fashion world, protection by shared banter and work. New ideas are careful and precious. The colour palette, the new collection, the new effects are sensitive and framed. Under white wraps the new collection hangs. Visitors are shown parts of it as in a peep show. Despite the phrases rolled out – *très chic, fantastique, les merveilleuses et les incroyables* – the new collection, especially the brocaded camouflage look, is stunning. A new vocabulary must be found for the collection, for the creations which will then enter the commerce of the world of fashion. The visiting editor, journalist, photographer is told this.

## THE SAFE HOUSE OF ALAÏA

This is the open secret, more like Rumi than the Herald Tribune. And the second skin of courtier and courier keep Monsieur Alaïa more inside than ever. In many ways the courtiers become like the 7 large dogs in the studio. It's comical. Sometimes it can appear there is more exchange between the dogs than between the courtiers. Restless, no niche is offered for reflection. But for me invisibility exists behind the camera, however tiny it is. I am allowed to walk anywhere, behind mirror and model, behind manikin and materials.

There within the wardrobe I leave the camera rolling whilst I take a walk and look from the windows over the rooftops of the Marais. Films, discs, photographs, papers, implements. Evidence of Hotel du Nord imagery, *Les Enfants du Paradis*, or *The Women* by Georges Cukor. On the walls a chance message, an image pinned up, something to tell the time or even the year by. Nothing is touched unnecessarily or moved. Nothing is disturbed. Part of the trust and the limits of patronage and flattery?

Oudh, a perfume tickles the nose of the couturier. Confident that any openness is ultimately irrelevant to the work achieved in the Maison. No clues are offered, no suggestions to research anything, no moments of interview or time put aside for this. Merely privileged witness and the camera. A game within a game, that leaves the space for the open work. Why should we seek a safe secret, something underwritten in the invisible? Why seek a spatiality or spirituality that are not needed for the controlled life? I would no more like someone delving into my life as I suspect he does.

The court looks on as a second skin. A filter, a screen, a veil, a cover; layers like apertures controlled each day. Micro-circuits opening to the outside world, beyond Paris. It seems Naomi Campbell has spoken out. Her name is always present in the studio, whenever the discussion turns to models. A possible stupid, unthinking moment, of which I am told there have been many. This time claiming Versace to have funded and founded her. I investigate. No one really knows the substance to this, no one knows what she has actually said, or even what she meant.

Under what circumstances and why is this voiced? Alaïa is understandably, I am told, upset. To whom does he express this? The issue is one of originality, precedence; of providence we might say. Apparently (I try and explore this later in a restaurant on Vielle du Temple) Naomi C. as a fifteen- or sixteen-year-old South London girl came to Paris and was 'taken in' at the safe House of Alaïa. Around that time Gianni Versace was creating his super-model shows (1988-1989) and integrated Ms Campbell for the first time with some others.

I have no idea if this timeline is correct. This could of course be researched but at that moment, it was not of much interest. I was more interested in the air in the house and how thick it was with the hint of betrayal. Some even spoke of a mole in the House of Alaïa. Who would want that, who would need that? Not much of this needed more investigation. It was one of the many passing upsets, the inflated moments which became part of this coded ambience. After the hurt had been expressed, no further communication.

## FLIGHT SK753

A Friday arrival from Charles de Gaulle. Is it 6 or 7 years since I was last in Paris? Am I going forward or backwards? Yet life goes both ways. The press was preoccupied with the murder of Versace. I expected a non-stop week of gossip and speculation. But the show must go on. One hardly imagines the super models putting off a week as a matter of respect. But why not? A meeting later in *La Tartine* on Rue de Rivoli at 1pm and then the Maison at 2pm. This was merely a sketch for time that may or may not happen, that may or may not deliver more invisible filming. A film without anyone knowing it was still being made.

*La Tartine* hasn't changed since the 1970s. Or then with subtle differences that I do not notice from the time I sat with all those *Georges Bataille* books. There is a Japanese poster on the wall. Three images show a fin de siècle *La Tartine*. The European newspaper article on Versace picked up on the plane reads as if he had become the younger version of the jester. But no mention of Monsieur Alaïa. Was not Versace one of Alaïa's orphans in an empire of ideas and fashion that emerged in the 1980s? I'd heard this phrase. For where did Versace get that talent for cutting fabric and such an intimate sense of form, if not from Alaïa?

No one wrapped clothes it seemed like Versace. Who has done the forgetting here? Wherefrom this displacement? What raises a budget from 30 million to 400 million? 12 fashion collections a year and the super productions that Alaïa

resisted? I hear of the shooting of Gianni Versace. Miami is held up once again as the violent city it is, and fashion is shocked to the core. It begs the question: does fashion have a core? A contract killing is suspected but then so to many other conspiracies.

Only vaguely do I wonder how this affects Alaïa. Would anyone wish to kill him and why? On the newsreels, the same models, the same catwalks are all cut for the current story. Interchangeable for the world outside looking in, enemies of living passion is all I can think of. And Oscar Wilde in *De Profundis*: "To regret one's own experiences is to arrest one's own development. To deny one's own experiences is to put a lie into the lips of one's own life. It is no less a denial of the soul." Into the lips of one's own life? Is that right? Did Alaïa consciously retreat in 1985 from the future that might have happened? To become as big as investors wanted him to become; the Alaïa Emporium?

## THE HURDY GURDY MAN

Occasionally there is an official invite into the 'ship'. It might be the interior of the old warehouse in the Marais that gives it this nickname. A strange message was delivered as we waited in the street below. Come upstairs. We wait for about 15 minutes until an assistant comes for us. We go up into the ship and then the studio, passed mirrors, mannikins and material. Only no one is around, except a young English student. Suddenly the jester jumps out at us. He had been hiding. I'd heard about the Alaïa pranks but this time his face looked slightly deflated. It hadn't really worked. Was it the diminutive stature that gave these pranks their edge and mischief?

*Le joueur ou le gamin?* It was on his face. Always that readiness and openness, slightly disarming; a five year old child in a 55 year old maestro. The afternoon led to scenes of exits and entrances whilst the little emperor appeared to hold court. Invisible clothes were visible, then disappeared. He barely lifts his eyes from his work, but he is listening. A gest may be made that acknowledges an understanding. It goes no further. I swear, whilst I continued filming, he would wink at me as if...as if all this was part of the greater prank on the world. This was a solitude situated in the hull of the ship. A rustling which answers itself, inside.

I remember the first moment of filming with the minuscule camera. A toy moment seemed to stun him. Like another of his pranks. He continued cutting, stitching, drawing, patterning. The cat decided to get up from the table and

leave. Remnants of material scattered all around. Seriously, with that camera! Where's Bruce?

It's Saturday, the third day in Paris. In the impossibility I have been put in, I search for more clues to the world of fashion. Forced into euphemism and then caressed into indifference. Even if we were left out of the intimacy, the stress, the secrecy, and the tyranny of the fashion world, we were still at liberty to imagine its own toll. Near Beaubourg in one of the discount stores, I pick up a compact disc of Donovan's music.

I imagine a trip down memory lane to the freer times of the desert. Pierre (PP) and I listen to it later that day, more and more at ease with this behaviour, more and more realising that Monsieur Alaïa has every right to refuse entry to this little camera. It is impossible to miss the associations with Alaïa when Donovan begins singing *Hurdy Gurdy Man*. The music stops. Donovan Leitch begins to explain that he was in India when he began the song. He had been meditating along with four Beatles, (a) Mia Farrow and (1) Beach Boy. This was also Sexy Sadie time. The innocence of these children was clearly infectious in the way Donovan was conducting this live recording in Holland years later.

Doubtless the minuscule Maharashi Yogi had been mystifying the children with his special brand of Transcendentalism. Suddenly Donovan explained how there was embarrassed silence as the Maharashi sat cross-legged on the floor on a deerskin. 'John Lennon,' he said, 'the wit and humanist...decided to

break the silence. He put his hand on the Maharishi's head and said: "There's a good Guru". They all laughed, and apparently Maharishi laughed the loudest.

From then on Monsieur Alaïa to us was no longer the little tailor, the genius, the Tunisian maestro, the one before Versace, the inventor of Naomi Campbell or the *sultan of stretch*, he was the 'jolly good guru'. And if he had been at the window in *Rue de Moussey*, he would have heard the laughter all the way from *Rue Vielle du Temple*. The jolly good guru needed another film not this one. The jolly good guru needed another person not me, and certainly another camera rather than this little 'devil'. 'Hurdy gurdy hurdy gurdy hurdy gurdy gurdy' he sang. We were indeed free.

Someone had the idea that we should have done some interviews: Yoji Yamamoto, Vivienne Westwood, John Galliano, Rei Kawakubo, Suzy Menkes. The list was as uncomfortable as the cosmetics and merchandising that have yet to be made from these names. What use would interviews be if they were to pat Alaïa on the head and say 'There's a good guru'?

What use would it be to read their lips and find that he has influenced fashion irrevocably, irreversibly? How can anyone influence fashion irreversibly when fashion is the one world that can cover itself up as fast as it reveals itself. Strindberg could manipulate his life so much that we knew nothing of his life that was any truer than the fiction he made from it. No one cared any further as the fiction ran away with itself.

How does someone who has no words create a life in words only for it to be denied? Was that not what we had here. Someone who had already been filmed, trying to take back the very images that could tell no further truth. Was genius 'invisibility'?

Was it the art of the invisible not the art of the visible? And if so, what is it we are doing if not making an invisible film on a genius who asks the mirror for the way back to childhood, innocence and the lost dream of a life lived forwards and backwards at the same time?

As the Tao story of the monkeys and the seven chestnuts puts it. The monkeys were extremely angry when their keeper proposed feeding them three chestnuts in the morning and four in the afternoon. Alright, the keeper said, I will feed you four in the morning and three in the afternoon. The monkeys were satisfied, the number of chestnuts was the same and the keeper lost nothing by it. I had reached the 'three in the afternoon' with Monsieur Alaïa. And I lost nothing by it!

## A KISS IN PLACE DES VOSGES

I remembered flicking through the huge press books on Alaïa in the Maison wondering where this fetish for self-documentation first appeared. Large plastic folders full of images from *Vogue*, *Elle*, *Cosmopolitan*, all the journals and magazines that matter in fashion. Were these the bits worth repeating, all the fragments that invite us into a person's world yet take us away at the same moment?

No words and images are going to interpret this life, chosen in their own order. Film itself is a life that frankly none of us ever lead. Or then so few of us. It is a kiss in *Place des Vosges*, a stroll past or a toy dog dragged for a walk. Press books tell you nothing about fashion. They organise the ambiguity of the lies told into something that should resemble merit. And we are fooled once more.

To write a life has always been easier than to imagine a life. Pages torn and the photographer is laid to rest. If he or she does not come up with adequate images of the work, they fail. The next morning the new photographer walks in, imagines a new rhetoric, takes the lace out of the gloves and begins shooting. Someone is pleased, someone somewhere else is behaving irresponsibly, and the fashion clan continues secretly, invisibly watching themselves in the whites of the cat's eyes.

Fame waits for a tap on the shoulder, immortality drops a bundle on the doorstep in the Marais district, and the dogs drop 'tandoori turds' for a North

African road sweeper called Albert dressed in a bright green road sweeping suit, waving to the camera not to be filmed.

He was not the dog walker! What right does fashion have to waste someone else's time when it is doing this endlessly? And here is three minutes of a wedding in Delhi that I filmed immediately after I left Paris without meeting the 'jolly good guru' at all. I now know that the film will be told differently. It can never resemble what it might have been. Like the keeper with the monkeys, I have lost no respect for the jolly good guru, I am just following two courses at once. And eating the chestnuts in the wrong order!

## BY THE OPEN SEA

I realise I merely wanted to film this man who was as small as my own father, to celebrate my own invisible father as much as this famous designer. Just as in philosophy so in film, you settle one score by neglecting another. I can now adjust myself accordingly. And just as with fathers, I now had to pass no test. Fashion invites you only by the back door. It asks you to be part of the clan, part of the court for a fleeting instant. It asks you to share the spirit but only when the skies over Place des Vosges are fine. But it clouds over.

There's a gentle note in your mailbox today saying, in fact, that there is no mail. Instead, fashion panics, tries to get ready in time for its impossible deadlines. And then shuts its doors to keep those deadlines. Deadlines, what a horribly precise word for this world. *Dead lines!*

Later, somewhere between Le Bouquet, Drancy and Blanc Mesnil, I began Strindberg's *By the Open Sea*. It didn't seem ridiculous to think of fashion as the arena of the superman without writing a thesis about it. But there, flashing through the Paris suburbs on the way to the airport I would remember the tinge of disappointment, of not being let into the Maison for the second or third time. I would remember the graffiti on the floor in *Place des Vosges*.

I had taken out the little camera after filming the Tango lesson somewhere near Issey Miyake's window. I did what can only be called an untidy, hand-held, unprofessional *effet de zoom-rapide*. There before me the clarity of the

words, *L'Ésprit de Clan*. Was a clan essential to fashion? Was it impossible to be alone within fashion? Or more precariously, did one have to create a family where there wasn't one?

Alaïa's clan was essential. It might change, some may come and go, but when in the clan, all doors would be locked open. In a family, as in all families, we must accept that a man may be brought up to be a child first and a man later, or then in some families the reverse. A man first, then a child later. There is no wisdom in ignorance that only those safe in solitude know.

## CHIEN CHIEN!

As I take up Albert Memmi's book *Le Désert* for some chance clues to Alaïâ's world of loyalty and fear, the rumour reaches me. It all has to stop. One of his assistants Max who was instrumental in trying to get this intimate portrait down on digital film has apparently resigned. He intends to go to Delhi and continue his work on Indian fabrics and materials. This however alters nothing of the impossibility of the project. So much filming has been done, so much in open secrecy. With no money, with no further support from the House of Alaïa the cessation is clear. Remember always to make it appear that you do not need this anymore than Mr Alaïa needs you. Or was it the other way round? The Jolly Good Guru! This is laughable.

The court continues to disbelieve the confidence of any film. This little intrusion barely lasting six months seems to indicate that fashion has merely rubbed out all but the closest confidence and trust. I begin to see what this solitude in fashion might mean. It may or may not have an Arabic sensibility about it. It is fiercely protective and demands fierce loyalty. Like the desert it is quick to change, to erase any trace, to blow over and be blown over. It writes out itself as in the pages of the books of Edmond Jabès. Quick to change into suspicion just as the weather can warn and advance the very sandstorm it is predicting.

Without being allowed into this world nothing is left but further creative speculation that adds to the gaming within fashion. It is then time to stop. We have

come as far as we could. Have we been betrayed, or have we betrayed in our own way? I think not. Has Monsieur Alaïa been betrayed?

No. But the camera is too tired. He has achieved that too. It has no choice now but to remain inactive. Governments will not fall. Empires will not collapse. The clothes are not always invisible, and the Little Red Monkey goes on and on. These houses of fashion will not betray their necessary secrets and fears.

Fashion does its best not to include you. Even the kindest of persons bringing the Alaïa dress or the Yamamoto shift are all part of the code that excludes you. At the beginning of this venture, I was not sure what was meant by being a 'fashion victim'. Now I have more of an idea. Fashion cannot include you because it would have to stay still long enough to reveal itself. Alaïa seemed to do his best to remain outside fashion's jealousy yet at all stages in the Maison fashion seemed to be proved right. It needs no one else more than it needs itself and its solitude. Self-reflexive and self-consuming, fashion is eating the serpent's tail as fast as you throw a six to get around the board.

There was something pleasing at this stage to walk from *40 Rue St Louis en L'Île* to *33 Rue des Deux Ponts*. I was taking soup and coffee with an old friend in his restaurant Les Fous de L'île. Patrick, in what seemed a very French reaction, kept using the word 'chien' about Alaïa when I told him what had happened. Predictable and lamentable, Patrick said, fashion always does this. To show how big it is, it must reduce something else in size. It's a false comparison.

*Chien! Chien!* I kept hearing in my ears as I walked back over Pont Philippe back towards *Rue Vielle du Temple*. 'Chien!' Perhaps I hadn't given fashion a chance. Guilty again of losing interest, perhaps I never wanted to give it a chance; it needs more patience than I was able to give it, more tolerance than I had. But somehow, I doubted it. Fashion had got all the patience it needed, all the admirers too. It didn't need an extra like me. Still, I wasn't quite prepared to think I had totally wasted my time. Irresponsibility is never only one sided. Chien!

## THE PARTIAL NOWHERE OF THE SOUL

Albert Memmi's book offers me the clues to the Sultan, a cross between the prince and the artist. Tense with the impending public appearance, the hand goes to the chin, the look is coy, the celebrity deflected. The Sultan looks less at ease at the moment he is most at ease. Is this accurate? Chattering contains all the coquetry in fashion in the intimacy of studio and ship. On guard but playing the streets of Paris as he must have played in Tunisia. The souk and its silence.

To be thrust into the foreignness of Paris, to speak through image and cut, light and silhouette, distanced from any nuanced commentary that follows by journalist, critic or expert. This is to have confidence in solitude. Does Alaïa have it? Did Alaïa have it? Thought, smile, gesture and the wide-eyed look. Through the pursed lips or the joyous tilt of the head as it goes backwards with Tina Turner's arms around him; the gamin carrying the boombox. He attracts. No texts. No explanations, no metaphysics of fashion or the desert. The ambiguity is calculated and precise. Simply that. Alaïa attracts. During the three days in Paris, I had with me the book by William Gass, *On Being Blue*. I had read it sporadically, shot in between this freedom.

I was interested in how Gass was making a case against colour and came across the line Berenson wrote about Impressionist portraits: "the portraits referred to will scarcely find now the admirers they had when their mere newness excited and, for an instant, fascinated the spectator." I imagined Alaïa knew this well enough. He feared this as he had already encountered it a decade ago.

Then he had made his own choice. How often do we approach one another with the unashamed sensuality of Feldman approaching *Men's Ready to Wear*?

Finally, the filming came to a standstill. At 2.30 on a December day in Paris I entered the Maison once more after checking into the hotel nearby on Rue de Bourg-Tibourg. I was invited to join the table in the kitchen. Immediately Monsieur Alaïa addresses PP with the words: What are you doing? Why are you still filming? As none of this had been communicated to us, this was a surprise though not entirely unexpected.

The insipid nature of fashion, the machinations, the games merely registered the suspicion everyone had for everyone else. No one of the court need be identified. It was already clear that the Mondo-Pop Mickey Mouse Sony digital camcorder was nothing when compared to a BBC or Channel 4 production. We would then be dropped again like limp salad.

PP held his own end and proceeded to explain to Monsieur Alaïa that all this was a case of appalling communication on the part of the Maison and their own self-interests and petty, internal intrigues. People, meaning the Maison, had paid lip service to this idea and failed to share any interest or understanding of a script. He pulled no punches, and it became obvious that there had been no real time to do the film, that no one in the Maison had discussed it, that no one had even approach the maestro. If this was the case, Alaïa ensured PP in French, that only he, and he only could decide on any of this.

This was the Sultan at work. Everyone in the kitchen remained quiet. Hardly daring to look anyone else in the eye. I enjoyed the release and knew PP could

handle it. After all we'd talked of the jolly good guru and knew we were dealing also with the hurdy gurdy man from Tunisia.

The silence of the courtiers protected the Sultan from decisions he should have made himself. Of course, this has devastating consequences, but it was not for us to identify these, or remain any longer than we needed. I wouldn't even know whether there was anything Arabic about all this suspicion and confused communication. I doubted. It would happen anywhere. There was something both cripplingly noble and self-destructive in all this. And what a film that would make!

And we knock on the skull to retreat to the dream behind the eyes. Has it been easy to see nothing and everything, to overthink the tantrums of fashion until the very private skill and solitude disappears under anxiety? Without calling it history, a man can take others along with such ferocity and passion, a man who can play a prank with a seriousness that may jeopardise his status. Momentarily! To carnivalize is to control. To retreat from control must surely include loss of control, loss of image. How are we to act in good faith and should one try to entertain the Sultan's power and patronage? Obsequiousness we had met everywhere. I was ready to stop, so ready to stop. The little kitchen at the top of the Maison had a crowded souk feeling. I wished someone would just take out a chess board and a hookah.

Impossible to work with, impossible to love, were these the current norms of a world like fashion that asks nought of your own soul. No Faust here, for the soul is not for sale. It was not that I didn't know how to continue this. It was the end. If this person is interesting, it has already been shown here. The

film and digital files exist not in a vault but in waiting. The ethics of self-destruction, no we can't go that far. Two years later I would write a drama called *Aalto-Ego*. It could have been *Alaïa-Ego*. Maybe the characters intertwine.

The film exists for therapy, and fashion might be that conspiracy that keeps it from ever appearing. And keeps the skin from feeling the wind through the desert. Alaïa was in exile, daily. I wouldn't dream of thinking I saw through any of this. Fashion would certainly go on finding the admirers it had when newness excited, but was the person locked in that instant, fleeting? Was Gass right? "Once spread across the spaceless night and total nowhere of the soul, how shall the stars be got back through the skull and eye and scope into the sky again?" This film I realised would never end. Safe in the solitude of fashion, it could only pause just like the designer for a moment, raising his spectacles, a cat in hand, a pistol and parrot nearby. Ready to wear, ready to film, a partial nowhere of this soul!

Trailing his hand comfortlessly through the heaped, dark piles of socks, he looked out over the open rectangles of distant counters and cases and racks and went toward Men's *Ready to Wear* to stand among the mountains of slacks, aware as always of the faint, sweet, oily smell of the massed cloth. He pulled at the rack of suits built into a wall, dollying it effortlessly forward on its big tracks, turning it soundlessly on its thick, greased shaft. He drew in one last deep lungful of the pleasant odour and moved on, the tweeds and herring bone giving him, as he glanced at them in passing, a feign illusion of speed.

Stanley Elkin (William Gass, *On Being Blue*)



3

“CUT!”

The coordinators and producers were in no doubt that the film had to proceed in some way. It had been announced in the Museum program. During the *Retrospective on Alaïa* it would be shown in the theatre, along with new material from Bruce Weber. It was never thought through enough. It bounced off other names, other career moves. This was no entry into fashionable society, the chance to rub shoulders with celebrities who rubbed shoulders with bigger celebrities. It was six months in my life, that's all. It concerns this or that meeting, the occasional good meal and the smile of the famous. After that it is nothing. So much nonsense, the welcome return to the grand zero. For the producers though, how can you sell a film that could turn out interesting without at least one member prepared to talk it up? How, indeed.

I fought indifference in this strange intimacy with a fashion great. The whole 'hola' atmosphere surrounding fashion and celebrity offers a beguiling solitude. It appeared impossible to be alone in the House of Alaïa for many of those in the court of this haute couturier. But then why would one want to be alone? The codes are strict but invisible. They can be picked up instantly. If the name does not appear in the Herald Tribune the next day after a collection or event, the atmosphere is tainted, for hours, for days even. The air is like a corset, the tighter it gets the more trust you might be offered. The guest walks on extremely thin ice, balancing flattery with genuine respect, sycophancy with admiration. It is virtually an impossible environment where the two characters within the genius can emerge at any time.

Without the obvious sense of humour and originality it is hard to see how such paradoxical silence and chatter in the fashion world and in the Alaïa House and court are negotiated. Yet haute couture can demand sometimes no wider public responsibility. It has few demeaning dependencies. By taking haute couture into the street however, Azzedine Alaïa obviously achieved a new school of fashion and an extraordinary creativity. Fortunate is the man in the calm secret of fashion's own solitude and death. And then one moment in the Groninger Museum, on a second or third visit, at a meeting with one of Monsieur Alaïa's confidants the writing was on another re-painted wall in that museum: "Monsieur Alaïa has decided. He doesn't want this film. He doesn't want any more filming. There will be no documentary." No longer one of the little troopers. Arabic ambiguity perhaps not, but Adonis comes to mind: *Rain on our deserts/ World charged with a dream and longing.*

I recalled the Press Conference at the Groninger Museum. I lost all detail to any timeline. The chaotic way any film was allowed to disintegrate before it began suggested a serious disharmony. I was not over-reacting; I was delirious to leave it all behind. The entourage flown in arrived at the wrong moment. No one had any script. They flooded a press event which was of no real concern or interest to them. It was pure presence that had become absence. Their ritual of greeting each other, people they'd probably only met a week ago in Paris, was targi-comic. There was a sense of serious intimidation and a blankness behind the eyes. Alaïa was pushed to the front, others behind him. He proceeded to do what he usually does.

He carnivalized the event, carnivalized the discomfort. There was a shyness that had always been there. Just as he was approached by someone, his close assistant came to him and said: 'Let's Go'.

This was and always had been a double bind. To film or not to film! As emotionless and as abruptly as it all began, the Sultan takes back what has gently slipped out of his control. To remain ambiguous within this is a direct method of working and deflecting to the work itself. Always the work. The image was over. The relief was palpable to all. It's Monsieur Alaïa who says "cut".





4  
DOCUMENTS

## SECOND SKIN - Portraits of Azzedine Alaïa

The documentary should not discuss where it need not. It should not add to the indifference about fashion nor seek to explain haute couture to the world. It should not attempt any more communication than is necessary in the fashion world. No one should speak of the film's narrative but it might still exist. Neither should the documentary psychoanalyse, enter a discourse on the body, space and the architectonics or attempt an intimacy it does not have or deserve. It should need no film crew, no sound recording, no fuss. The director should be invisible.

The documentary should not encourage cheap familiarity. It should not address Mr Alaïa as Azzedine before that moment arrives. It might be that it should never address Mr Alaïa as anything but Mr. Alaïa. It should not try and wheedle information out of Mr. Alaïa as if he holds the key to his own understanding. It should not attempt to put the microphone or recorder in front of all and any mouths in the hope that someone somewhere will come out with a funny story. It should not unzip the fashion world. It should avoid metaphors that try and explain the strangeness of celebrity. It should not gossip when the pictures will do that themselves.

The documentary should seek no childhood anecdote or invent any unnecessary deprivation. It should avoid desert phenomenology, any affected *saharienne* sentiment. In no way should it attempt a thesis. Instead, it should re-invent the solitude necessary to work in this paradoxical discipline. It should observe, reflect and witness as in a silence. In short, it should be a silent movie called Second Skin - discrete, non-intrusive and intimate - impossible to shoot in any other way. Let's begin again.

## PETITS RÉCITS (Alaïa - *stylist da sensualidade estilista da sensualidade*)

Cécile Delanghe (1967) : *Here I simply must interrupt; because it really seems these days that fashion has gone crazy, from metallic dresses to astronaut fashion, a craziness that's unique.* In 28 portraits in miniature - petits récits - the documentary should

hold a story. These uninflected portraits should last 1, 2 or 3 minutes and are given order by the obvious linearity of a film and the viewer's indifference or interest. In between these miniatures there will be a variety of intervals (statements, comments, opinions from a variety of people, writers, stars, philosophers, mothers and daughters on a variety of topics that includes but is not exhaustively about fashion or couture).

Depending on the order of such statements and the miniatures, the film takes on different meanings with different viewers. The 'uninflected' portraits gain significance by the portrait that precedes them, by the portrait that follows them, and by the 'interval text' that divides them from each other. These portraits could consist of filmable and 'unfilmable' moments: a taxi ride, a cup of coffee, a fitting, a celebrity, an ennui, an event lost to fame, a rendezvous, a reflection, an extract from a film, an intimacy of scissors, a bench in the Luxembourg Gardens, a message, an extract from someone else's life....a unique document, a series of photographs unused, le diavolo and the alchemist, a model's moment, an event of self-irony, an event not entirely unconnected to fashion, a showing, an unexpected detail, a discussion on inter-planetary travel or native rights in Lapland, an overheard conversation, knitwear material as landscape, food preparation, Josephine Baker and Arletty, the imposition of Paris, the craft of glamour, head-lines not headlines

## PETITS RÉCITS 2

.....an unwanted anecdote, a press presentation, an over-fussy moment in an unknown brasseries, a bolero, a favourite sandwich, a book's spine, a pretentious guest discussing documentary films, a lunch with Tunisian coffee, a telegram, an unknown bouquet of flowers, a book by Philippe Sollers or Christian Bobin, a well-wisher and a long walk in the Tuileries, a dog's moment, a rhythmic swing, a disappointment, hotel du nord, the cu(l)t of Royalty, a series of friends, a laughter of hands.....

... a shop front, a chance musical phrase, a passion for indifference, the failure of photography, the AA uniform, striptease and the pout, devious clichés, a step back from the grotesque, better than plastic surgery, a muted telephone conversation, the accuracy of quotation marks, *les liaisons dangereuses*, the profound and not-so-profound regularities of fashion, a diffident browser in Maison Alaïa, a grimace leading to a decision, a show-must-go-on anthology of smiles, an interlocutor who doesn't agree with Roland Barthes...

...discrete price tags amongst the tomatoes, moments of preening and essential flattery, a maison passed from the other side of the street, a departure, a coffee machine, an emotion filler, fashion as destiny, a history of a remnant, pins and needles, patterning and tacking, knits and fibre optics, stretching the vocabulary, a short-term memory, a pause from speaking....

FRENCH CURVES : un pistolet et un perroquet (1)  
a digital notebook on Azzedine Alaïa (52m.)

Cécile Delanghe (1967) *Everything is possible, fashion extravagances have gotten to such a point that you almost want to shut your eyes so you won't have to see any of it.* Azzedine Alaïa is one of the foremost, innovative, exciting and visionary designers working in fashion today. For over twenty years Alaïa's innovative fabrics and form-hugging dresses - the trademark Alaïa chic - have bedecked the bodies of some of the world's most beguiling women, from Farida Khelfa to Tina Turner, from Beatrice Dalle to Glenn Close, from Naomi Campbell to Heidi Fleiss. Mimicked but impossible to copy, his signature is perfection, Glamour with a capital G. 1997 will be an extraordinary year in the history of Maison Alaïa.

The digital notebook is composed mainly of detailed miniature portraits showing Azzedine Alaïa at work. Using a small digital camera, an 'intimate' journal of Mr. Alaïa's unique tailoring and cutting, facing and lining etc. is shown during his studio work on the 1998 Collection being prepared at Maison Alaïa, Rue de Moussy, Paris. These working notebook sequences form the core of the documentary.

The digital sketchbook, a 52 minute documentary, will be scripted, compiled and filmed to capture first-hand the intimate progress of Mr. Alaïa's work for the retrospective at The Groninger Museum in December 1997. This 100 year museum-island, with its glittering gold tower, submerged facade and new premises designed by Alessandro Mendini, Co-Op Himmelb(l)au and Philippe Starck bridges the city and province of Groningen, a town located in the North of the Netherlands.

The focus of French Curves will be Alaïa's continuing intimate role in the preparation of his 1998 Collection developing new designs and materials, selecting garments for presentation and fitting on specially designed glass manikins. The film will also include works by the contemporary artists Julian Schnabel, Jean-Michel Basquiat and Cy Twombly (works included by Mr. Alaïa in the exhibition). This activity will ultimately lead to the climax of the year's effort captured in the final hectic last week when Alaïa will install a twenty year oeuvre in the extraordinarily diverse and eclectic exhibition spaces.

To balance the notebook quality of the digital camera work, various other material will be used; sometimes as a backdrop to frame Alaïa's work, sometimes full screen to feature the 'fashionable' world that surrounds Alaïa. Where appropriate this can also be a layered image. This backdrop material will use three framing devices:

- colours from the 1998 collection.
- textures from material developed by Alaïa
- photographs taken of his work.

Azzedine Alaïa is also the designer who gave Vivienne Westwood her launch in Paris. In the documentary John Galiano, Yohji Yamamoto and Vivienne Westwood will be featured commenting on Mr. Alaïa's unique influence and contribution to the world of fashion. Placing this work in a contemporary cultural context, *French Curves* will be a mystic and subjective portrayal of this extraordinary tailor and designer known throughout the world as Alaïa. The anticipated television release date would be February-March 1998 to coincide with the ongoing exhibition in Groningen.

*Retrospective:* The notebook material and miniature portraits are complemented by a more structured filming (16mm/Beta DX) of the Retrospective at The Groninger Museum (December 1997). These sequences will act as visual landscapes and show over a decade of Alaïa's work. Expansively sited in the eclectic museum architecture and space, the digital camera will also continue to document Alaïa's ongoing work during the dressing, fitting, refining and installation of the exhibits in the Retrospective.

*Backstage:* A fourth element in the documentary will be the inclusion where possible and appropriate of existing footage from Azzedine Alaïa's past work, the shows, extracts from interviews and films, press comments and opinions, citations from Alaïa. (Material that includes but does not exhaust fashion or couture and which depends on the copyright and re-use of any available material.)

## A CAT A DOG A PISTOL & A PARROT (shooting script)

Quiet introductory sequence with Alaïa alone in the studio working at his table accompanied in various position by a cat, a dog, a pistol and a parrot. The pistol and the parrot are two 'french curves', nicknames given by the French to the instruments used to draw the lines, prepare the patterns on card and cloth. Treatment: Digital Image set on a grey backdrop. Music - Oum Kouloum and/or Sidi Mansour - Jerrari.

L'ouvrier (a working man) - This section involves Alaïa with his own work, his own method of working in the studio and the few assistants that follow and aid as the work proceeds. These images showing the various stages of his work will be accompanied by various musical extracts from Oum Kouloum. Though in colour, the subtlety of this section will give a monochromatic feel contrasting with the more colourful' and 'loud' later sections.

### *Sequences:*

- 1 Endless searching: Sculpting the Toile (calico and draughting paper/the stockman)
- 2 Patterning: Drawing (pistol and parrot), fitting and modifications (craft paper)
- 3 Cutting and stitching, facing, lining, ironing
- 4 Modelling: (Essayage) seaming and darting
- 5 Refining: the final patterning process (Pattern card) Treatment: Digital images set on differing colour/material background. Colour or material from Collection 1998.the laboratory (Florence)

Material choice, development and an innovative technology has been crucially important and significant in Alaïa's work. This notebook sequence in Florence (also Vicenza?) would show AA in Florence where new materials are invented, worked and perfected; for example, the weaving methods of wool and lycra and boiling it to form the alaia-signature stretchy mosaic fabric. Experimenting with lighter and lighter fabrics - houpette, cygne, singe....

*Treatment:* digital sequences set in photographs chosen from the work of Prosper Assouline, Jean Paul Goude, Horst P.Horst, William Klein, Dominique Isserman, Peter Lindbergh, Jean Baptiset Mondino, Paolo Roversi, Bruce Weber. (This treatment also used later in montage sections where necessary to sharpen digital image).

6 *Azzedine Alaïa (unthread/defilage)* - a photobiography / une photobiographie  
Using available material from Alaïa's past (for example the photographs from any forthcoming book), the current biography (press book) and other linked 'biographical' images available and offered, a lyrical photobiography is presented.

Using people, places, show images and models, interview material, photographs of Alaïa's work and the possible use of intercut images of Arletty (Hotel du Nord) and Samia Gamal. This is also accompanied by very clear but pithy statements by others about Alaïa. No other text and no attempt at a chronology except that suggested through images.

*Music:* Arletty - Farid el Atrache - Tunisian Chants and Rhythms

7 *Fashionable: (à la mode/second skin/j'adore)* this is the part of Alaïa's work that involves others, the 'fashionable' world of fashion. He is sometimes present in this or then in the background working at his own table. This is the essential noise that surrounds the work, in and out of fashion, as William Klein put it. On this section the collection of Press headlines on Alaïa form a running cross- image rhythm. These texts are used typo-graphically and rhythmically to help the timing and pacing of this section and can also be inter-cut with images of magazine extracts and (possible) extracts from W.Klein 'Qui etes-vous Polly Magoo?' 'Mister America' and 'In and Out of Fashion'.

*Because everyone who has ever read a fashion magazine is familiar with the typical image of woman projected by the publications. It's essentially a contradictory image, it must be admitted, since this woman must be everything at once in order to represent the greatest possible number of women readers. Roland Barthes*

8 Sections: *The audience/photographer/the interview etc.* (with AA) - The Clients -The Representative -The Manufacturer - The Readers. (Luxembourg Gardens on a Sunday)

Treatment: Treated over-stylistically in black and white to contrast with the more subtle lines and colour of the Alaïa working sections. Also where necessary to balance the digital material set in a larger sharper image (photographs). At times, duotone or slow motion in this section will suggest 'frustration', 'impatience' or 'pain' as much as 'elegance', 'desire' and 'effect'.

Sound: Silence, chatter. Music: various (How Much is that Doggy in the Window, The Typewriter, Yellow).

### 9 French Curves

This section involves a photo-shoot (Paolo Roversi and Naomi Campbell) and the collection in Rue de Verrerie and documents the role Alaïa plays in this, preparing, dressing and correcting the garments on the models.

Treatment: digital image set within the plush red/green stripe in the Maison Dressing Room. Music: Josephine Baker.

### *The Imposition of Paris - Default to Male Bias in Fashion?*

*Can we change our women? Can a woman change for us? Up until now (speaking roughly and somewhat symbolically), Paris has imposed a woman on us. That is why Paris reigns supreme in our imagination.* Witold Gombrowicz 1954

Image(i)nation A small montage on Paris, as the world of images and multi-ethnicity. Reference to Gombrowicz and also recalling AA's youth in Tunis where he made models of Parisian chic for the Tunisian nouveau riche, this section will include small vignettes of Paris, Canal St. Martin day and night. Hotel du Nord, details from the Monde Arab building (the sun filter, the lift, the changing 'skin' of the building) a few streets and chance events (Tibetan drumming: Beaubourg). Also intercut with extracts from the following films (copyright and budget depending): Pain, amour ainsi soit-il (Dino Risi/ Sophia Loren) - Women (Georges Cukor) - Amore (Rossellini) - Zou Zou (Josephine Baker) Music: Chet Baker/ Malcolm McLaren *Paris Paris, Bye Bye*.

### *10 The Underliner*

The Groninger Museum Retrospective. This section will use a layered image. The large image (wide format) will show the range of Alaïa work in the various Museum spaces. This will be shot in 16mm. film or transferred from Beta Digital. In an inset we will see Alaïa installing these pieces on the special glass manikins and his detailed preparatory process in the museum. This will also include his early visit(s) to the museum in June 97 (Hi-8 Cassette 1). This section is upbeat, as loud as fashion can possibly get. (Possible use of extract of Heidi Fleiss, Hollywood Madam - I did it for the Alaïa dress!!) Music: Tina Turner. Simply the Best.

### *Coda: Atmosphere Atmosphere!*

A cat a dog a pistol a parrot and a fortunate man

A quiet withdrawal as the 'vicious' invading digital camera seeks the tranquillity of the studio with a cat, a dog, a parrot, a pistol and a fortunate man. This section will return to a quiet grey background as we observe Alaïa in inset image (in colour) working once more surrounded by the occasional cat, dog, visitor, photographer, pistol and parrot. Arletty 'Atmosphère Atmosphère' - echo.

*Music:* Sidi Mansour – Jerrari.

THE ARCHIVE Filmed Material- Digital Material (Mini Disks/MD)

**Hi-8 Cassette 1. (7.6.1997)**

AA in Groningen Museum discussing the Retrospective. Present: AA, Max, Christophe, Carla, Mark, Jim. Various locations in the Museum plus cafe and meeting room. Shots (pans and details) of Museum exterior (rain and sun)

*MD 1 (19/20.7 1997) 60m.*

Maison Alaïa (Rue de Moussy) interior: studio - AA working + cat - cutting, stitching, using parrot and pistol - AA ironing - scissors (portrait and details) - AA & others watching Video screen in studio (Bordeaux 85 and old shows) - Photographers' visit: David Seidner/Dominique Isserman - DI showing photos -AA and Francois Baudot (talking together and informal showing of collection 'under white wraps') - AA with assistant checking garment on manikin - dogs - the inner courtyard roofscape (behind and above hall) - AA continuing working whilst on telephone. Monde Arabe (detaills - facade, skin, sun filter system, lifts, roofscape) - Luxembourg Gardens (Sunday Afternoon Orchestra and readers around the park)

*MD2 (22.7.97) 60m.*

AA working: cutting, patterning, tacking and stitching (4m) - AA fitting dress on mannikin - 'panther' jacket - Christophe's apartment and work in progress (for Retrospective) - The Changing/Dressing Room; Rue de Moussy (empty) - visit of Rossy De Palma - Gown - AA with various assistants at working table - leather jacket- animal house (various positions: dogs and cats) - AA book dummy flicked through - Absolut Alaia and other magazine images - Evening fitting session: AA with Melissa, Max and Hannah (dress/gown)

*MD3 (23.7.1997)*

Fitting continues with Melissa - Mini Jupe - Boutique details (Rue de Moussy) - more animal images positions - The Hall (empty, with and without dogs, strong slanting sunlight) - exhibition colours (Africa/Mark W.) - Leather representative (with Max) - Arletty still images - The pattern book (flicked through) - Chance dancing event (Tibetan?) in Beaubourg (sound and image).

MD 4 (24.7.97)

Rue de Moussy (front/washed streets) - Rue de Verrerie (courtyard, doors and small boutique) - the solitary 'calico' and drafting paper (toile) model - Material representative (with Max) - Pans of empty studio - newspaper scrap on Versace on the street - tree protection grid - Carla and catalogue discussion (with Mark, AA in background working) - Carla/ Azzedine talking - Mannikin dressed/undressed by AA - Gown fitting AA and Melissa + assistants and onlookers - pistolet and perroquet - AA and cat alone - working table (still life)- William Kleine (images from book: In and Out of Fashion-AA and magazine at working table (with Farida) - Hotel du Nord (afternoon) - Canal St.Martin : boat negotiating canal lock details (afternoon)- Canal St. Martin (morning) - 'Arletty' boat passing through - Frog Divers (details) - Musée de Lunettes (Arletty, Onassis glasses etc.) - sheep 'fleeced' image billboard - Canal St. Martin (night traffic, light and blur)

*Material still* - (never to be filmed)

- 1 Reproduction of material from the forthcoming book of AA's childhood etc.
- 2 Original photos of the various photographers necessary for reproduction.
- 3 The Photo Shoot (Paolo R. / Naomi C.) Documentation of AA. dressing the model and arranging the garments and supervising. (Digital)
- 4 Florence (AA with Max) AA supervising the production and material inspection etc.(D)
- 5 AA working: searching on the 'toile' (alone?)
- 6 Rue de Moussy: The Kitchen: Preparation and Lunch (D)
- 7 Rue de Moussy: The Atelier (D)
- 8 AA and the preparation of the manikins in Groningen (Digital/December1- 5th)
- 9 Filming the Retrospective with lighting etc. (Beta digital/ Film?)
- 10 (optional) Selected extracts from the opening, dinner etc in Groningen (D)
- 11 (optional) Entretien filming (AA)
- 12 (optional) short interviews Westwood, Goude, Yohji Y, S.Menkes, Francois Baudot, John Fairchild (D)



Isn't it grand! isn't it fine! Look at the  
cut, the style, the line!

The suit of clothes is all together  
But all together it's all together  
The most remarkable suit of clothes that  
I have ever seen.

These eyes of mine at once determine.

The sleeves are velvet, the cape is  
ermine  
The hose are blue and the doublet is a  
lovely shade of green.

Somebody send for the Queen.

**Danny Kaye /Frank Loesser (1952) The  
King's New Clothes**

Who's afraid of fashion? Contained within is both reluctance and excitement. The visits to Paris and Groeningen in 1997 and 1998 became part of the unmade film. The list of the material shot with a small digital camera is included in the documents. Various sketches for an idea, a shooting script were drafted, communicated and then locked away, cut off. Nothing went through. Various ideas for a book were imagined but always with the feeling that someone else had already written this book.

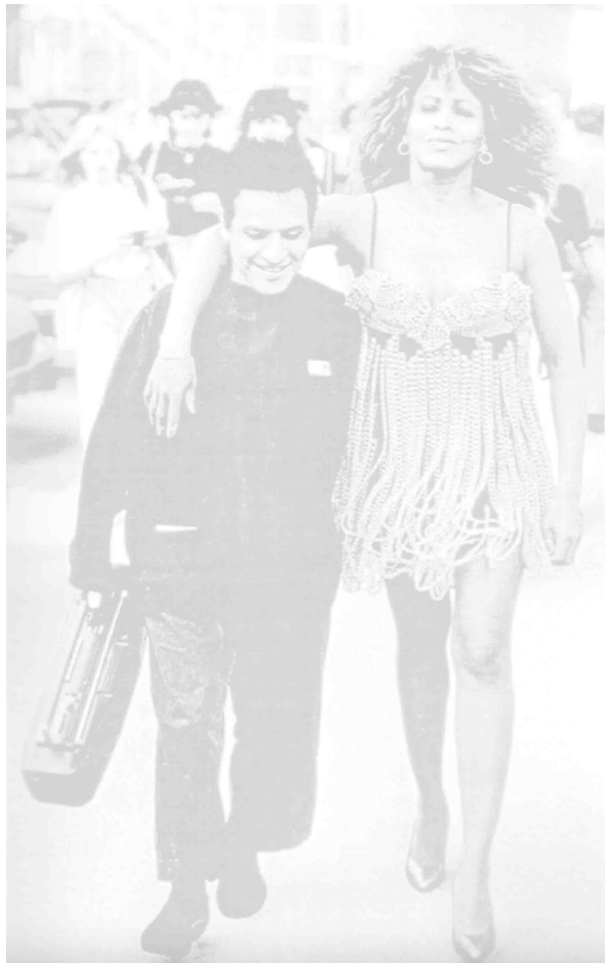
This leads us sometimes to condemn ourselves to an accidental life. Sometimes it is the secrecy in our lives which is left to be re-discovered and to hide once more the irrepressible nausea and melancholia. I attended the house, the maison of Alaïa, as a guest just as I played with my Godson's toy cars and tractors, just as I constantly felt the wet corner of my daughter's comfort bear as I write this for her. I could imagine how we would even plan a route under the sofa. This route under the sofa, the pranks Monsieur Alaïa could play on all his visitors are the nearest I will come to the book never written on this unseen film.

Roger Connah 1997- 2023















ISBN 979-1-687899-09-2