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Avant-garde Cuts: Schiaparelli and the Construction of a Surrealist Femininity

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Marylaura Papalas works on writers of the European avant-garde. She has published on both Greek and French Surrealists. Her current monograph project analyzes the creations of onetime surrealist fashion designer and memoirist Elsa Schiaparelli and in particular the construction of identity and femininity in her designs and in representations of her work in contemporaneous fashion magazines.
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Abstract

Elsa Schiaparelli, an Italian-born fashion designer who established herself in Paris in 1922, became one of the most successful women in the industry during the interwar period. This paper closely analyzes Schiaparelli's most innovative designs, in conjunction with her memoirs, in order to elucidate her conception of female identity, an important but often misconstrued theme in surrealist art.

KEYWORDS: Schiaparelli, surrealism, fashion, avant-garde, "Shocking Life"

Leading up to the publication in 2014 of Meryl Secrest's comprehensive biography of Elsa Schiaparelli, a number of important events, including the 2003 exhibition entitled "'Shocking!' The Art and Fashion of Elsa Schiaparelli" and the 2013 reopening of her boutique at the original Place Vendôme location in Paris, have stoked new interest in the Italian-born fashion designer. Various scholarly articles published within the last 20 years, devoted to exploring Schiaparelli's vision of female identity in her sartorial work, also shed more light on this long overlooked female figure. There has been little investigation, however, of Schiaparelli's role within surrealism, one of the most important avant-garde movements of the twentieth century (Blum 2003, 121). This might be because the male members of the surrealist movement still today tend to elicit more scholarly attention than their female counterparts, and because the female figure depicted in surrealist art remains "a figure veiled in mystery" (de Beauvoir 1949, 380). As a woman collaborating with the surrealists during the height of the movement in the interwar years, Schiaparelli provides a striking example of a female voice that demystifies the "veiled" surrealist woman. This paper, employing a theoretical framework of concepts developed by Jean Baudrillard, Judith Butler, Julia Kristeva, and others, demonstrates how Schiaparelli's sartorial designs and her writing deconstruct the opaque and simplified version of femininity presented in canonical surrealist works, revealing a fragmented, profound, and multi-layered discourse on gender, female agency and feminine identity.

Elsa Schiaparelli was born in Rome in 1890 in the Palazzo Corsini, a late baroque palace in Trastevere Rome, to a family of academicians and scientists. Despite the family's proclivity for intellectual endeavors, Schiaparelli's parents were shocked and embarrassed when their 14-year-old daughter, unbeknownst to them, wrote and later published a book of indiscreet poems with a Milanese publisher (Schiaparelli 2007, 20). This book, the last known copy of which was lost and/or destroyed when the waters of the Arno River flooded the Central National Library in Florence in 1966, remains unknown to the public today.

Schiaparelli married in 1914 at 23 and followed her husband to Nice and then to New York, where they soon became estranged and where Schiaparelli struggled to raise her daughter and to eke out a living as a single mother. Women like Francis Picabia's wife Gabrielle, whom she met on the boat from France to America, helped Schiaparelli survive these difficult times. Gabrielle introduced Schiaparelli to Man Ray and other members of the avant-garde intelligentsia then stationed in New York, who assured important contacts when she returned to the French capital in 1922. There, she continued to socialize with Dadaists and surrealists at cafés and cabarets like the infamous *Boeuf sur le Toit* (Secrest 2014, 64, 68–69). These friendships stimulated her creativity and encouraged Schiaparelli, who did not like the way she looked in the

trendy and new contemporary sports clothes, to design her own sweater, which garnered such positive reactions that a wealthy acquaintance provided the young designer with the financial backing to begin work on her first collection in the winter of 1923–1924 (White 1986, 54).

It is perhaps not by chance that Schiaparelli chose fashion, which is one of the more efficient mediums for effecting cultural change. According to Caroline Evans and Minna Thornton in their article on fashion and the construction of sexual identity, fashion is a particularly important “signifying practice” that reproduces and changes “the cultural conception of the feminine” (1991, 49). Fashion (both the designing and wearing of clothes), as understood by these authors and others, illustrates how society constructs femininity.

In addition to being a medium where women could shape ideas of femininity, fashion was also one of the few avenues available to women to experience success and financial independence, something that the rise of a number of important female couturières at this time proves (Steele 1991, 70–72). The fashion world provided more opportunities than the other arts at the time. Even show business required “the presentation of the woman herself as performer and decorative object rather than as a power behind the scenes” (Evans and Thornton 1991, 50, 53). Thus Schiaparelli, in her role as fashion designer, was particularly well-positioned to alter the discourse around the female body, femininity, and gender identity and at the same time be successful at it financially.

Schiaparelli’s first big break came in 1927, when Lord and Taylor Fifth Avenue ordered 40 copies of a black sweater with a white trompe-l’oeil bow tied on the front. The sweater, whose unusual stitch was sewn by a talented group of Armenian seamstresses led by Arrosiag Mikaëlian (a.k.a. Mike), highlighted the kinds of illusions and artifices Schiaparelli would continue to employ throughout her career (White 1986, 59–61). Less than 10 years later, in 1935, Schiaparelli opened her Place Vendôme boutique, the first of its kind to have street access and a prêt-à-porter line ready to sell (Blum 2003, 71).¹

She recounts these experiences and more in her 1954 autobiography, her only surviving written work, published the same year she closed the Place Vendôme boutique. She wrote the book in both French and English and the two editions were printed with the identical title *Shocking Life*.

Simulation and Shimmering Surface

An important theme that emerges in both her writing and her fashion designs is that of illusion. Like the bow-tie sweater described above, Schiaparelli’s most revolutionary designs and ideas often engage with the perceptions of the viewer, questioning the concept of reality. Another early example is the skeleton sweater, which gave the impression that the wearer was “being seen through an X-ray machine” (White 1986,

61–62). Both of these designs from the 1920s underscore Schiaparelli's interest in exploring notions of truth and fiction, between reality and "sur"-reality, or what lies beneath that which we see.

Discerning between the reproduced image and the original is a problematic conundrum, according to Jean Baudrillard in *Simulacres et Simulation*, that obfuscates the idea of reality. As we will see below, much of Schiaparelli's work exemplifies the idea of a perceived or subjective reality, so that the symbols and signs which emerge from her writing and designs consistently subvert any notion of an objective authenticity. On some level, Schiaparelli had thought about the idea of original and replica. In her *Shocking Life*, she writes that she is not bothered by issues of copyright infringement and even feels flattered when copies are made of her creations (Schiaparelli 2007, 204; Watt 2012, 24). Her casual attitude about original and copy, real and simulacra, merges with her representations of illusion and reality, and, ultimately, femininity. Many of her experiments in multiple realities rely on a mechanism, like a mirror for instance, that fragments reality and insists on a multidimensional experience. Evans links this with the first line of the designer's autobiography: "I merely know Schiap by hearsay: I have only seen her in a mirror. She is, for me, some kind of fifth dimension." There are several levels of fragmentation evident here. First, the fragmenting of her name from Schiaparelli into "Schiap," the sobriquet by which she was well-known. Second, the fragmentation of the narrator's identity, presented as a casual shift between first and third persons in one sentence, a transition the author continues to manoeuvre throughout the story with no apparent pattern. Unusual by most standards for an autobiography, this constant play between names and narrative voices underscores the multiplicity and fragmentation within the persona of the autobiographer.

Among the various forces that work to split the author's personality, the power of the public eye and its ability to create multiple perspectives emerge as another important component of this narrative. The author's admittance of not knowing "Schiap" in the above quote is an example that highlights the distinction between her outward public persona and her private one. The author expands on this idea with another mirror anecdote later in the autobiography when she describes ascending a staircase and taking a glance at an elegant stranger whom she subsequently realizes is her own reflection in a mirror. She had not thought of herself as so sophisticated and worldly, and only realizes, with the help of the mirror, that others see her as just that. This story highlights a hyper awareness of social performance and the shaping of identity by way of exterior appearances. The mirror anecdote also places the narrator in a *mise-en-abyme* context and intensifies the refracted and complex female image reproduced throughout the book. These multiple, mirrored images underscore the question of authentic or singular identity and provoke the inevitable question: who is the real Schiaparelli?

Figure 1

Mirror Dinner Jacket, winter
1938–39, Zodiac Collection.
Source of image: The
Metropolitan Museum of Art,
<http://www.metmuseum.org>.



Echoing the subtextual question pervading her memoirs, Schiaparelli employs reflective materials and textiles that simulate reality. She designed a fabric called “treebark,” which she used for gowns and which resembled the bark of a tree (Blum 2003, 185). Shiny and reflective fabrics like the one used in her 1937 shimmering gold lamé gown, or the dinner jacket with sequined breast panels from the same year simulate the mirror effect, and reflect and refract light and images (Figure 1).² She even uses cut and fractured rococo mirrors for a 1939 dinner jacket, something that, according to Richard Martin in his description of the piece, “suggest[s] a window view into the figure” (1987, 38). The dual function of the mirrors as both refracting devices and symbols of depth and interiority highlights the complexity and multi-layered textual and sartorial female identity in Schiaparelli’s oeuvre.

Interior versus Exterior

Other designs that highlight the depth and complexity that lie beneath the surface are a series of suits and coats presented in 1936. Collaborating with the surrealist artist Salvador Dalí, Schiaparelli experiments with the idea of drawers, something Dalí had been doing in his own work.³ Earlier that year, the surrealist artist had painted a piece entitled *Anthropomorphic Cabinet*, where a grotesque reclining nude with drawers emerging from her chest seems to be suffering, perhaps from the chaos of the open storage compartments. Like the painting, Schiaparelli's coat has "miniature drawers, complete with dangling handles" (Blum 2003, 123). Although no copies are known to exist, we have a photograph of models wearing the suit taken by Cecil Beaton and published that same year in *Vogue* (USA) as part of an article entitled "Fashion: More from the Paris Openings." Beaton's photo, which glosses the first page of the spread, shows two models wearing a three-quarter-length skirt and a jacket with two variations, both cinched at the waist, with decorative drawers, some of which serve as pockets. The backdrop for the photo is a stark surrealist landscape typical of Dalí's paintings. One of the models is holding a copy of the surrealist journal *Minotaure*, whose cover for that issue (number 8, 1936) was a Dalí drawing of a woman's naked body with a drawer in place of her chest and various other cavernous hiding places covering the surface of her body.⁴ Beaton's photo echoes Schiaparelli's use of reflected images by creating a *mise en abyme* where the drawers theme, in sartorial and graphic images, is repeated. Below and to the right of the photo, the editors provide another Dalí sketch of a human figure covered with drawers, similar to his drawing on the *Minotaure* cover, reinforcing this iteration of drawers.

But to the right of this sketch, a text attributes the drawer idea as originating with Dalí, something that Schiaparelli, almost 20 years later, clarifies. In her memoirs, she explains that the suit, although inspired by Dalí's "famous paintings," was a team effort. Schiaparelli writes, "Dalí me faisait de fréquentes visites. Nous créâmes ensemble le manteau à nombreux tiroirs, d'après un de ses fameux tableaux" (2007, 116: Dalí would visit me frequently. We created the coat with multiple drawers together, after one of his paintings). Their collaborations were born out of a mutual respect for creativity and an ability to shock, something Dalí corroborates in his 1942 memoirs, *The Secret Life of Salvador Dalí*. He praises Schiaparelli's innovativeness, despite his professed great friendship with Chanel, and attributes the stimulating intellectual and artistic atmosphere of the second half of the 1930s, in part, to the Italian-born dressmaker's creations (Dalí 1993, 369). For Dalí, this period was defined:

not by the surrealist polemics in the café on the Place Blanche, or by the suicide of my great friend René Crevel, but by the dress-making establishment which Elsa Schiaparelli was about to open on the Place Vendôme. Here new morphological phenomena

occurred; here the essence of things was to become transubstantiated; here the tongues of fire of the Holy Ghost of Dalí were going to descend. (Dalí 1993, 340)

This passage, quoted by Palmer White, Dilys Blum, and a number of other critics, is significant because it underscores Schiaparelli's role as one of the more influential and "talked about" figures of the time, something confirmed by historians (Steele 1988, 253). More importantly, Dalí's remarks position Schiaparelli as a female artist whose work was more innovative than that of the surrealist men meeting at the Café de Cyrano on the Place Blanche. He confirms the significance of her contribution not only to fashion, but to avant-garde philosophy, and in particular, surrealist ideology.

One particularly important surrealist device at which Schiaparelli excelled was spontaneous playfulness, and the idea that life should be fun and full of ludic experiences, something exhibited by the Desk Suit, whose sewn-on drawers, some of which are pockets, could be confused with those drawers that are just decorative. Playing with the surface of reality, in this case potentially tricking and confusing the viewer, is an important recurring theme that defines her work. Like Dalí, who distinguishes Schiaparelli's effectiveness among the Parisian avant-garde, Diana de Marly, in her *History of Haute Couture*, distinguishes Schiaparelli among her designer colleagues as the "joker in the world of fashion" (1980, 150).

Experimenting with notions of rationality and farce, surface and reality, illusion and truth are practices Schiaparelli shares with the surrealists, but her Desk Suit nevertheless distinguishes itself from the work of the group. Robyn Gibson, in her article devoted to the Desk Suit, suggests that Dalí and Schiaparelli, despite their collaboration on the suit, present two different versions of the female. Dalí's conception of the "drawered" nude highlights his ideas on women as vulnerable objects that could be penetrated, whose secrets "could only be opened through psychoanalysis" (Baxter-Wright and Schiaparelli 2012, 80). Schiaparelli's creation, however, which boasts some drawers as actual pockets and others as just decoration, suggests a certain authority for the female. Gibson writes, "in Schiaparelli's interpretation, the New Woman's secrets were safe since only the wearer knew which drawers (or pockets) were real and accessible and which were false and sealed" (2003, 54). The woman wearing the suit can decide when to use her pocket-drawers, she can control access to those drawers, and can reveal at will their hidden secrets.

Another revealing design is the "Skeleton Dress," presented as part of the summer 1938 Circus Collection (Figure 2). Exposing a spine and ribcage in padded relief against a conservatively cut black evening gown, the dress unmasks the very core of the body, giving a tactile quality to something conventionally impalpable. This tactile performance of femininity, juxtaposed with the spine, a metaphor for strength and fortitude,

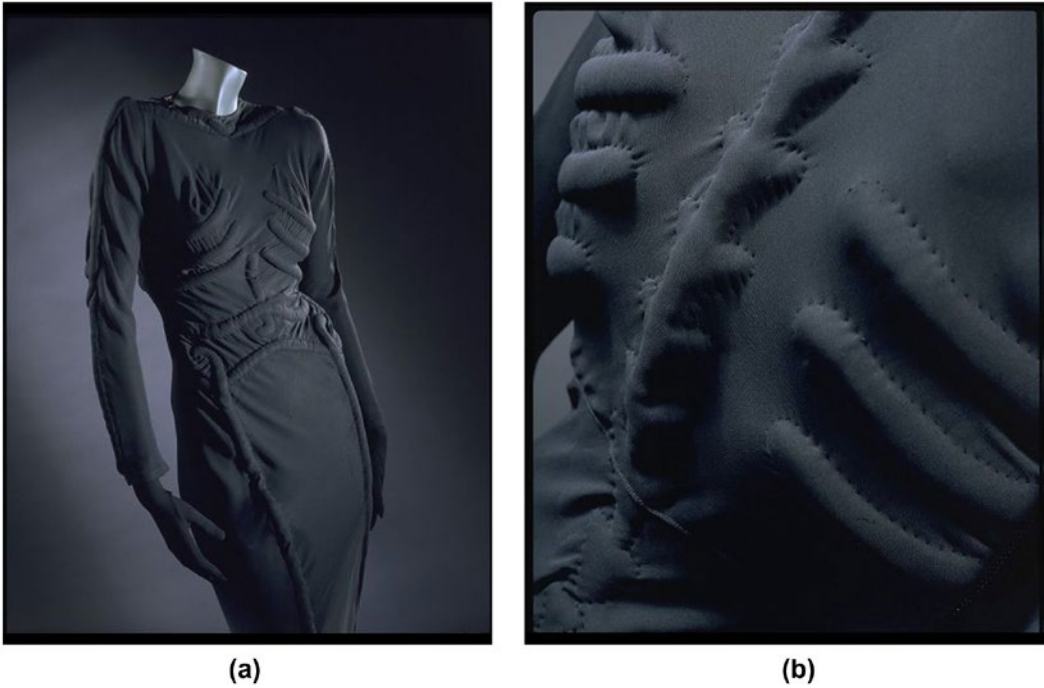


Figure 2

Skeleton Dress, Summer 1938, Circus Collection. Source of image: © Victoria and Albert Museum, London. This credit line represents the "Trustees of the Victoria and Albert Museum" (a non-departmental public body established by the National Heritage Act 1983).

presents an exceptionally resilient and at the same time exposed femininity. This gown liberates the female interior, exposing it for better or for worse, to the public.

From the same collection, the "Tear-Illusion Dress," which echoes a 1936 Dalí painting entitled "Three Young Surrealist Women Holding in Their Arms the Skins of an Orchestra," in which one of three female figures wears a form fitting gown that seems to merge with the skin, is full of holes and rips that look like torn flesh. Like the painting, Schiaparelli's white gown (faded from the original pale blue silk crepe) boasts a *trompe l'oeil* print designed by Dalí, which

...looks as if it had been savagely and repeatedly torn, but is in fact printed with the rips carefully cut out and lined in pink and magenta. Images of fur incongruously lining the rips of the printed dress add a bestial tone to the work (Baxter-Wright and Schiaparelli 2012, 79).

In Schiaparelli's version, there is an accompanying headpiece that renders the rips tactile, as actual fabric resembling skin is peeling away

Figure 3

Tear Dress, Summer 1938,
Circus Collection. Source
of image: The Philadelphia
Museum of Art, [http://www.
philamuseum.org](http://www.philamuseum.org).



and pinned back to the veil, revealing fleshy streaks of red (Figure 3). Less gory than it might sound, Schiaparelli's "Tear-Illusion Dress," like the "Desk Suit" and the "Skeleton Dress," brings the inside of the body to the surface. Evans and Thornton (1991, 50) argue that this highlights themes of vulnerability, but I suggest that this vulnerability, displayed on a highly elegant gown, actually demonstrates female resilience to it. The gown is not succumbing to violence, it is appropriating it and transforming it into power.

In contrast to this vision of interiority, power, and liberty is the embodiment of the feminine on display at the Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme, which opened on January 17, just a few weeks before the Circus Collection's debut on February 4, 1938. One of the more memorable exhibits of the Expo, which was "the most complete demonstration of Surrealism's visual output to date," was the mannequin alley,

which showcased 16 mannequins, most of them unclothed but covered in confining accouterments (Polizzotti 1995, 451). For example, André Masson's mannequin, the "plus grand succès" of the exhibition, depicts a female whose head is enclosed in a birdcage (Jean 1959, 281). Not only is she physically restricted, but a green velvet band tied around her mouth would prevent her from speaking. Instead of speech, a flower emerges from the band over the lips (Figure 4). Sonia Mossé, the only female to contribute to the alley (although a number of other females contributed to the exhibition at large, including Meret Oppenheim, Jacqueline Lamba Breton, and Gala Dalí), restricts her mannequin with a draping mesh body-length veil on top of which a large faux beetle sits at the place of the lips ("Mannequin de Sonia Mossé"). Both Masson and Mossé's simultaneous veiling (with the band, flower, mesh, and beetle) and unveiling (with the otherwise naked mannequin) of the female body confine her movement and leave her vulnerable. They depict an imprisoned and speechless female.

Schiaparelli's embodiment of femininity displayed in the "Desk Suit," the "Skeleton Dress," and the "Tear-Illusion Dress" deconstructs the surrealist trope of female vulnerability promulgated by contemporary surrealists. Schiaparelli's creations, moreover, are wearable and engage with the female body in a palpable way. By donning the garment, the wearer is choosing a certain performance, or what Judith Butler might call a performative act of gender.⁴ Although Butler (2010) argues that acts, gestures and attributes, including clothing, do not express any authentic or true gender, but simply perform or reenact

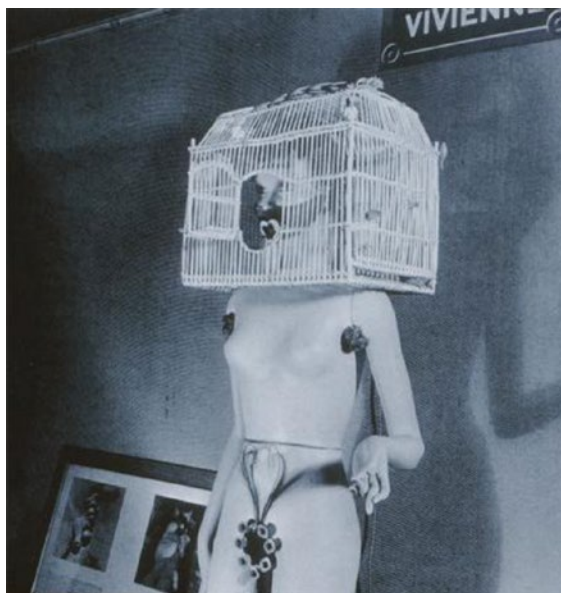


Figure 4

André Masson, *Le bâillon vert à bouche de pensée*, 1938 International Surrealist Exhibition. Source of image: ARTstor, © 2007 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris.

an already socially constructed concept of gender, I would argue that within this already manufactured construct, Schiaparelli's designs represent an alternative to the gender binaries present in the work of her surrealist colleagues.⁵ Instead of playing into a hyper-feminine stylization, emphasizing standardized notions of feminine sexuality, or expressing femininity as an objectified and powerless alternative to masculinity, Schiaparelli's creations incorporate inanimate objects, like drawers, bones or shreds of flesh, which do not typically signify sexuality at all. These kinds of sartorial devices construct a multilayered economy of signifiers that signify something beyond the female body and stand in stark contrast to surrealist renditions of femininity that rely on stereotypical signifiers of the female nude to emphasize feminine attributes.⁶

Redefining, Reflection and Refraction

Designs like the "Desk Suit," the "Skeleton Dress," and the "Tear Dress," which reference unconventional gender signifiers, diversify the "sedimentation of gender norms" which, according to Butler, are an accumulated "set of corporeal styles which, in reified form" create sexes (2010, 486). In this section, we will continue to look at these alternative kinds of "corporeal styles," with a focus on those that reference or reflect the female body or accouterments associated with it. The 1937 Shoe Hat is one such example (Figure 5). Inspired by a photograph of Dalí wearing his wife's slipper on his head, Schiaparelli designed an upturned black felt shoe with the heel in an optional "shocking pink" color as a hat (Baxter-Wright and Schiaparelli 2012, 74, 119; Watt 2012, 116). Unlike the "Tear Dress," which directly references the flesh of the body, the "Shoe Hat" references an accouterment of the female body. The design redefines the function of the shoe and, by extension, the function of clothing, accouterment, and fashion itself. If the shoe can be placed in a different and surprising context, reinventing its purpose and social significance, cannot the woman wearing this "Shoe Hat" also become something else?

The "Lips Jacket," which was part of the same winter 1937 collection, and a result of another collaboration with Dalí, also subverts conventional fashion concepts by isolating a particular feminine article and placing it in a different context. At the fitted waist of a tapered black crepe jacket, Schiaparelli embroidered a pair of lips on the edge of each side pocket. Isolated and misplaced, the lips sparkle against a somber backdrop of sheer blackness.

Isolating female body parts, especially those of the face and hair, is not uncommon in the work of well-known surrealists. Paul Eluard, in particular his 1926 book of poetry *Capitale de la Douleur*, exemplifies this aesthetic.⁸ For example, his untitled poem that begins with the line "Ta bouche aux lèvres d'or n'est pas en moi pour rire," puts into stark

Figure 5

Shoe Hat, Winter 1937–38.

Source of Image: The

Metropolitan Museum of Art,

<http://www.metmuseum.org>.

focus the disembodied lips and mouth of a beloved female other. “Ta chevelure d’oranges dans le vide du monde” is another poem from this collection that presents a detached image of the female body, focusing on the hair this time, as if it were floating in a void, isolated from the context of reality.⁹

Various critics like Susan Suleiman, Mary Anne Caws, and Rudolf Kuenzli, who analyze typical surrealist manipulations of the female figure, consider these kinds of isolation and objectification tactics a disempowering mechanism that trivializes females and renders them misunderstood and mysterious. The problem with surrealism and its portrayal of the female body, according to these critics, is that it reinforces masculine discourses about the unknowability of women. It is true that these examples of the fragmented female in Eluard’s poetry, and in many of the examples of his surrealist colleagues, tend to objectify the female by sexualizing them and couching the images in terms of

something desired. The fragmented parts of the female become isolated objects of love and admiration. Eluard's examples also function metonymically as a synecdoche, where the part replaces the whole, suggesting that a beloved can be reduced to just one of her characteristics.

Schiaparelli's lips, however, do not reduce the female, but work to fill and enrich the image through a process of layering, in this case a set of fabric lips deposited on top of a real body. Like a palimpsest, where older writing is effaced to make way for newer writing, the human body becomes part of a complex vessel of meaning where layers of sartorial garb adorn it. Sarah Dillon, in her book *The Palimpsest: Literature, Criticism, Theory*, elaborates on Julia Kristeva's ideas about geno-text and pheno-text presented in her book *Séméiotiké: recherches pour une sémanalyse*. Dillon explains that the original text, or geno-text, generates the meaning of the subsequent layer, or pheno-text. As a result, a palimpsest reveals contemporary cultural phenomena through the more recent pheno-text, as well as a deeper history of meaning through the geno-text. Because of the constant interplay of voices and texts, there emerges a multiplicity of signifiers, or images; there is no singular signified or fixed meaning in this kind of multi-layered text (Dillon 2007, 85–87).

If we understand Schiaparelli's embroidered lips as a pheno-text, and the original lips of the body as the geno-text, a dialogue about the female image emerges. The pheno-text sparkles in pink and, unlike the geno-text, relays a fabricated and technical rendition of the original mouth, the source of emerging words. The pheno-text emphasizes the possibility of creation, invention, and reworking of a traditional idea. Furthermore, Schiaparelli's pheno-lips are connected to the skin and thus touching, yet noticeably displaced from the original. Unlike the golden lips of Eluard's poem, which exist in stark isolation from the rest of the female body, Schiaparelli's sartorial palimpsest facilitates a multi-layered and refracted feminine discourse.

The idea of the body as a canvas on which to create a textured female identity is evident in a series of dinner jackets resulting from a collaboration with Jean Cocteau, an artist who was never an official member of the surrealist group because of a tenuous relationship with André Breton, but whose poetry and films have surreal qualities and are seen by critics as attempts to defy conventional ideas about art and its place in society. His sketches of the female figure, which Schiaparelli embroidered onto dinner jackets for the autumn 1937 collection, also highlight certain aspects of the female physique. On the back of one of the jackets, the stark lines of two female profiles looking at one another form the shape of a vase on top of which a pile of roses emerge and overflow. The illusion of the vase, outlined by each profile, echoes the idea of the mirror, refracted images, layered meanings, and sartorial palimpsest.

In this same collection, Cocteau sketched another dinner jacket, this time a woman whose golden hair, in gilded metallic sequins, cascades down the arm of a fitted jacket (Figure 6). Her arm extends down the

Figure 6

Cocteau Dinner Jacket, Fall 1937. Source of Image: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, www.philamuseum.org.



edge of the lapel, cutting across the wearer's torso in an overlay, and the shiny embroidered hand holding a handkerchief echoes many images of hands in surrealist art, most notably the 1964 *Livre de Poche* cover design for *Nadja*, the short story de Beauvoir refers to in her critique of surrealism's understanding of women. More than the other Cocteau collaboration, where the visual illusion was limited to the emerging vase shape made by the two profiles, this design multiplies body parts. The embroidered arm on the lapel becomes a third arm in addition to the two real arms of the model. This jacket, with its delicate profile and cascading hair on the shoulder and sleeve of the jacket looking upwards in close proximity to the real one of the model, presents a tension between reality and sur-reality, geno-text and pheno-text, depth and façade, interior and exterior. The pheno-text, or embroidered profile,

simulates a conversation between the original geno-text, or the female wearing it. The layering of faces, real and embroidered, generates echoes of a discussion, reverberations of a process of sedimentation constructing a more varied gender identity. Like the mirror episode in her memoir, the lips and profiles on these Schiaparelli jackets reflect and fragment the female image, making an overt statement about the autonomy of female discourse.

Conclusion

Schiaparelli's sartorial and textual construction of female autonomy, however, is not always so clear. It becomes particularly complicated when she describes, during her stay in London, the English suffragettes in a mocking and derisive manner (Schiaparelli 2007, 40). Parkins also points out how Schiaparelli's views on the women's liberation movement were complex at best "but mostly hostile." Not only did she shrug off such efforts at women's independence, she was critical of women who did not conform to her idea of feminism, referring to them in a 1937 interview as "mannish freaks that made it difficult to distinguish between a man and a woman" (Parkins 2012, 103).

Although these views on women's rights are problematic, and unfortunately put into question some of her representations of female autonomy and independence, they are at the same time part of a pluralistic and sometimes contradictory vision of the female and are characteristic of the kind of fragmentation we have seen in Schiaparelli's work. Consequently, this fragmentation is not necessarily a weakness. It can even play into the construction of the female as a spectacle, something that allows for a separation and detachment of the female spectacle from reality. Evans and Thornton explain how this fragmentation and resulting spectacularization of femaleness allows space for Schiaparelli to control her representation of femininity. They write:

By creating herself as a spectacle, ironically, as Schiaparelli did, a woman puts a distance between herself and her observers, a space within which to maneuver and to determine the meanings of the show. She takes control of the mask, the disguise, that is femininity. (Evans and Thornton 1991, 55)

According to these authors, Schiaparelli's tactics generate a liberating ambiguity. The mask of femininity, which does not display the full picture of identity, leaves unanswered questions that women can control, answer, and manipulate.

Parkins, in her article "Elsa Schiaparelli and the Epistemology of Glamorous Silence," agrees that ambiguity can be empowering. Analyzing Schiaparelli's public persona, Parkins points out that she strategically chose in her autobiography to present certain aspects of herself

to the public, resulting in a nuanced, ambiguous and more glamorous female identity. Parkins sees this glamour, although superficial, as a mechanism through which women like Schiaparelli can negotiate their identities. She writes,

Schiaparelli's attempt to remain in the spotlight while also controlling the parts of herself she offers to the gaze gestures at a new understanding of visibility for women in this period. Her strategic deployment of glamour suggests that invisibility can challenge rather than reinforce the gendered binaries that circumscribe understandings of women's lives in the structures of modernity. Making a spectacle of the unfulfilled promise of her deep interiority, she refuses the binary construction of agency and victimhood around which feminists have tended to orient our historical and theoretical reflections on modernity. (Parkins 2011, 193–194)

Schiaparelli's attempts to hide parts of her identity, and highlight others, might be criticized by Suleiman, Caws, and Kuenzli as deploying the same simplifying and objectifying techniques as her male surrealist counterparts. But Parkins argues that Schiaparelli's incomplete, half-hidden, suggestive and glamorous identity, because it is manipulated from the female perspective, provides women a role, and thus an active part, in the construction of their identities. Parkins' analysis elucidates how a certain "invisibility," incompleteness, and fragmentation regarding feminine identity is a sign of agency and choice.

Linda Nochlin also evaluates the significance of depicting an incomplete female in her book *The Body in Pieces*. Noting that the tendency to represent the body in fragments has been present since the Enlightenment, Nochlin focuses on the modern era, particularly impressionist painting and the works of Degas. She points out that in many of his paintings, Degas framed the picture with people who were cut off by the edge of the border. She writes:

At its most extreme, the Degas cut-off view may suggest that, like the ballet performance, the pictorial representation is nothing but a convention, and just as the dance performance ends with the falling curtain, representation ends with an encroaching plane of colour, the erstwhile realism of the scene transformed into pure abstraction by the end of the act. (Nochlin 1995, 47)

For Nochlin, the representation of bodily fragmentation highlights the separation of art from reality, underscoring its role as convention. Schiaparelli's fragmented female also underscores the idea that there is no objective reality, and thus no one authentic coherent identity. Self-identification is a process of piecing together fragments of character

and personality, of layering these fragments, and of sometimes revealing, sometimes not, what lies beneath these layers.

Illustrating this complex idea of fragmented identity, Schiaparelli mentions in the preface of her autobiography a 1933 Picasso painting that she owns entitled *Bird Cage and Playing Cards*. She explains that her friends think it portrays her well. She writes:

There is a cage. Below it are some playing-cards on a green carpet. Inside the cage a poor, half-smothered white dove looks dejectedly at a brilliantly polished pink apple; outside the cage an angry black bird with flapping wings challenges the sky. (vii-viii)

Like Picasso's bird painting, the themes of freedom and imprisonment emerge as metaphors for the constraints surrounding the French interwar female identity, and these themes play themselves out in Schiaparelli's designs.¹⁰ The two birds, one black and one white, one free and one caged, foreshadow the split and fragmented female identity that Schiaparelli proceeds to construct in her autobiography and in her sartorial creations. The "Desk Suit," the "Skeleton Dress," and the "Tear-Illusion Dress" all underscore the idea of female interiority and the idea that the designer, and the wearer, can choose what to hide and what to expose, what to set free and what to guard locked away. The "Shoe Hat," the "Lips Jacket," and the Cocteau jackets, which can be understood as contributing to the idea of the female identity as a palimpsest of multiple components and fragments, also parallel the image of the two birds, which similarly suggest a multiplication of identities. Finally, Schiaparelli's autobiography, her writing techniques, and methods of self-fashioning, all underscore the symbolic imagery of the two birds, divided and struggling to find their place.

Ensuring symmetry in her narrative, Schiaparelli ends her story with another bird. The epilogue, which is barely a page long, describes her home in Hammamet Tunisia, where she chose to spend most of her retirement. Lying on a couch on an enclosed terrace, or *moucharabia*, she relays another story about a bird that has found shelter there, but cannot find its way out. She writes: "[Schiap and her dog] listen to a small bird which has taken refuge under the *moucharabia* roof in a moment of panic, singing in English: 'Open the door... open the door... open the dooorr...'" (209) Schiaparelli's final word on liberation comes from this chirping little bird whose song, like Schiaparelli's career, seeks to open the door and let free a more constrained and tethered identity.

The liberation of the female identity in Schiaparelli's work stands in sharp contrast to her surrealist colleagues. Schiaparelli's skillfully constructed femininity counters imagery like that of Masson and insists that women can break free of these kinds of surrealist cages. Her representations, in particular their shocking and spectacular nature, resist typical surrealist embodiments of the feminine, and diversify ideas

about gender and power relations more generally. Schiaparelli's work acts as an important counter-discourse to a more binary and limited image of the female, opening the door of the cage and liberating the imprisoned feminine within.

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Notes

1. The boutique, which reopened at the same address in 2012, no longer has an opening on the street, but is located on the second floor.
2. Images of these designs can be found in Baxter-Wright and Schiaparelli (2012, 31) and Watt (2012, 95).
3. Examples of Dalí's experimentation with drawers can be seen in his *Venus de Milo with Drawers* (1936), his ink drawing *La Cité des tiroirs* (1936). Blum points out that another drawer painting, *Le Cabinet Anthropomorphique* (1936), was bought by the collector Edward James, who paid in part with haute couture clothing, including some Schiaparelli designs, intended as gifts for Gala Dalí (Blum 123).
4. Evans (1999) has effectively argued that Butler's analysis of performativity, applied to Schiaparelli, can reveal themes of fashion as masquerade and disguise, suggesting a decentered subject.
5. One example of a simplified gender binary is Marcel Duchamp's mannequin from the alley of the 1938 International Exhibition of Surrealism, where he dresses a female mannequin as a man.
6. Others have remarked upon Schiaparelli's ability to build clothes in a way that ignores the natural shape of the body. See Dilys Blum's (2003) chapter entitled "Architect of Fashion, Carpenter of Clothes." White (1986, 170–171) argues that Schiaparelli denies the body any importance at all at the 1937 haute couture exhibition at the Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques in Paris when she does away with the manikins and hangs her designs on a clothes line instead. Evans, quoting David Bate in his analyses of Cahun, also argues that Schiaparelli's "cultural coding of the body" effectively deemphasizes "the female body as torso" (as cited by Evans 1999, 15).
7. For other examples, see André Breton's *Nadja* for images of female hands, gloves, and eyes isolated from their context. In film, Jean Cocteau uses the same approach in *Le Sang d'un Poète* (1930) as do Dalí's and Luis Buñuel's 1929 film *Un Chien Andalou*. For a discussion of Schiaparelli, hand images, and surrealism, see Blum (2003, 122–123).
8. Another artist whose work exemplifies the typically male surrealist discourse on the female body is Hans Bellmer, a German who fled to

Paris and became associated with Breton and the surrealists there. *Poupée*, a series of photographs of plastic dolls taken apart and put back together in illogical, backwards, and shocking ways, was published in the surrealist journal *Minotaur* in 1934. Various critics have written about the suggested violation and aggression towards the female body that images like this represent.

9. For a straightforward example, see the 1936 the glass handbag in the shape of a cage featuring three drawn birds in flying positions reminiscent of Picasso's tableau, behind prominent black bars. French *Vogue*, number 8, August 1936, page 43.

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