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Abstract

This article examines the surface qualities of textile objects in the 1880 to 1939 period, analyzing representations and descriptions of both highly finished and maintained textile surfaces, and degraded and ill-maintained garments. It is argued that the finishing techniques applied in manufacture were carefully replicated in domestic processes, and that qualities of surface and

finish in textiles were important both materially and symbolically in the stratified social systems of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Britain. Theoretical insights from Julia Kristeva and Mary Douglas are used to understand the meanings of textile objects in use and wear, in their relationship to the bodies that wore them, and in the processes of maintenance to which they were subjected.

Keywords: textiles, surface, finishing processes, boundaries, social history

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The Interpretation of Surface: Boundaries, Systems and Their Transgression in Clothing and Domestic Textiles, c.1880–1939

Introduction

Historical reference in dress has never been about evolution, continuity ... In dress, surfaces float free of their histories ... Curating is like creating a new grammar, new patterns of time and reference ... Unlike language, but more like the multiple meanings of a pack of tarot cards, objects can be read back to front and side to side. (Clark 2004: Preface)

Thus writes Judith Clark, historian and curator of fashion. This statement is indicative of a way of thinking about fashion, its history, and its contemporary practice, that emphasizes bold leaps of imagination, recognizing the way that fashion as a principle raids the past for visual and conceptual inspiration, breaking history from chronology. The *Spectres* exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum (curated by Clark) used the image of a baffling system of turning cogs bringing old styles and modern reinventions and innovations into constantly changing alignments (Clark 2004), and Ulrich Lehmann has used the image of the *tigersprung*, the “tiger’s leap” back into the past, as a symptom of

fashion’s relation to the past in the modern period (and, in the process, has claimed for fashion a role at the center of modernity) (Lehmann 2000). This image has also been taken up by Caroline Evans in *Fashion at the Edge*, her influential work on the complicated interaction between contemporary fashion and its many pasts (which formed the theoretical basis for the *Spectres* exhibition). Evans explores the ways in which, in recent fashion, “the distinction between past and present is almost imploded” (Evans 2003: 13).

I have no quarrel with any of the arguments presented by Clark, Lehmann, or Evans; quite the contrary. If we think of Clark’s “histories” as historical genealogies, the transmission of influence in the stylistic or even conceptual form of garments, and their representation in the fashion image, then historical returns and references are indeed intricately complicated and convoluted, looped, and twisted. However, “histories” in fashion, dress or textiles, could also mean the *particular history of a particular garment in use and wear*. How has it been worn, and by who? How many times has it been dirtied and

washed? Has it been ripped, torn, or frayed? Has it been mended, and what other maintenance techniques has it been subjected to? Looked at from this perspective, which concentrates more on use than on design, and on material qualities rather than representation, garments—fashionable or unfashionable—and indeed textile objects more generally, do have very particular and not at all free-floating histories. These histories are directly inscribed upon their *surfaces*, and determined by influences from without (the world around) and within (the body of the wearer).

As editorials and articles in various issues of this journal and others make clear, the fields of textiles, dress, and fashion (their histories and theories) are closely connected and intersecting in concerns and approaches (Barnet 2003; Honeyman and Godley 2003; Palmer 1997; Styles 1998). Various influences by business and economic history (emphasizing changes in production), by museology (stressing the *object* of study), and by cultural studies (concerned primarily with systems of representation) the three fields have nonetheless made many attempts to meet and communicate: an increasing attention to the material qualities of objects is common to all three. This article has commenced with reference to literature that is closely allied to fashion history and theory, because the concerns of all the authors cited has a clear relationship to the subject matter of this article; textile objects in their relationship to time and its effects. However, this study takes the subject into territory that fits comfortably into a wider

historiographical context, spanning approaches sympathetic to textiles, dress, and fashion. The main emphasis is on materiality (though it is recognized that sometimes materiality can only be approached through representation), materiality that is the result of both production techniques, and everyday techniques of maintenance. What are the social meanings of these techniques, and of worn and dirty, clean and pristine, textiles?

In 1903 novelist and journalist Jack London published a book called *The People of the Abyss*, based on an undercover investigation into poverty in the East End of London. The author describes his “descent” into the “abyss,” a process commencing with the buying of a set of clothes from a second-hand dealer: “a pair of stout though well-worn trousers, a frayed jacket with one remaining button, a pair of brogans which had plainly seen service where coal was shovelled, a thin leather belt and a very dirty cloth cap” (London 1903: 9, 11). London notes the fact that these clothes had belonged previously to what he calls “other and unimaginable men” (London 1903: 11). The phrase evokes the fact that these second-, third- or fourth-hand garments had a (somewhat mysterious) history, its traces eloquently marked upon their surfaces in a pattern of dirt and decrepitude.

Just as eloquent is a photograph, taken in the 1930s by Bill Brandt (see Figure 1). The garments depicted here (the maid’s cotton dress and apron and fine lawn cap) are as extreme in their material, surface qualities as those London describes (here these qualities are mediated through the lens and

the photographic print rather than written description). The *absence* of fraying, wear, dirt, and dust in this photograph are not merely incidental qualities of clothes that are newer than London’s; rather, there is a deliberate strategy of surfaces operating here. The way that the sleeve of the woman’s dress creases crisply at the elbow implies starch, the apron appears to have a sheen produced by glossing or glazing, and the cap, with its precise and stiff ruffles, would have taken starch, considerable skill with a goffering iron, and a significant investment of time, to achieve. The shine of the tea set and the silver dish-cover reinforce the impression that this image depicts a social system in which the highly finished surface was imbued with considerable significance. As Pennina Barnet has noted, in the very first issue of this journal, “the meaning and value attributed to qualities of surface can vary” (Barnet 2003: 3); it is the material, surface qualities of textiles and textile objects, their production, the influences that degrade them, the attempts made to maintain them, and their socially variable meanings, that I intend to explore in this article.

In pursuing such a subject, I turn to a very literal everyday chronology of wear and tear and maintenance in fashion and textiles that may seem somewhat prosaic in comparison to the dizzying conceptual somersaults identified in the work of Clark, Evans, and Lehmann, with their turning cogs and tiger’s leaps. However, I would counter any accusation that this research is too plodding and pedestrian by saying that the subject matter I will describe—the finishing and refinishing of surface qualities in response to damage

Figure 1
 Bill Brandt, "The Perfect Parlourmaid"
 (*Picture Post* July 29, 1939). © Bill
 Brandt/Bill Brandt Archive Ltd.



and dirt—also, like cogs and leaping tigers, brings the past and the present into interesting juxtapositions and confrontations. The decay that time and use visit upon textile objects is insistent and inexorable, while resistance to it in the work of cleanliness and maintenance is both heroic and ultimately futile, patterned by repetitions and cyclical procedures, and inevitably, at the period in which I am interested, associated with class status and difference, and with strictly gendered domestic labor. These issues are intimately connected to the body; clothing and domestic textiles such as bed linen or table linen are marked by their direct contact with the body and its functions; what might these marks, and the strenuous efforts made to remove them, mean? In Simone de Beauvoir's words, "washing, ironing, sweeping, ferreting out rolls of lint from under wardrobes—all this halting of decay is also a denial of life" (de Beauvoir 1993[1949]: 474). Might we say that it is equally a denial of *death*? "Reflection on dirt involves reflection on the relation

of order to disorder, being to non-being, form to formlessness, life to death," is the rather more open formulation of anthropologist Mary Douglas, a statement that suggests very strongly the ambivalence of everyday battles to maintain and keep clean textile objects (Douglas 1991[1966]: 5–6). The struggle could be characterized as either heroic denial or futile celebration of life or death, indicative of a resistance to embodiment, or alternatively of solicitous care for the sensual body.¹ It should be apparent by now that I am interested in the textile object not as a static museum piece, but as a material *possession* that is subject to *process*. Process, in terms of the effects of decay, has received a certain amount of attention in the study of material culture in recent years (see for instance deSilvey 2006). What I wish to examine here is process, or rather a set of processes, that involves decay but also its deliberate reversal, so that textile objects can slide rather dramatically back and forth between dirty/worn and clean/maintained states, at the volition of their owners,

although the long-term tendency, however protracted, will always be towards disintegration. One of the virtues of this approach is that it allows a full consideration of agency in the relationship between people and things.

A brief note on methodology and sources: as my two initial examples (Jack London's written description and Bill Brandt's photograph) indicate, this article is fueled by the contrasts between the two extremes of this subject. On the one hand are dirt and dereliction, and on the other cleanliness and maintenance. The first is found in a literature on poverty, homelessness, and tramp life, and photographic representations of this subject matter, and the second in household advice literature, which sets out didactically the complex techniques and rituals involved in the domestic maintenance of textile and other surfaces, as well as analogous visual evidence. Although much of my material in this initial exploration is thus rather polarized, I would like these extremes to suggest also the many gray areas and gradations that lie in between. Yet the fact that extremes are prominent in historical evidence suggests a fascination, in the period under discussion, with both the pristine and the degraded surface that may have social, and perhaps psychological, significance. To explore this more fully, I will turn in later sections to the theoretical constructs of both Mary Douglas and Julia Kristeva.

Wear and Tear in Contemporary Textiles

Ever since Rei Kawakubo first sent a (carefully and deliberately) holed and frayed jumper down the catwalk in *Commes des Garçons'* first Paris

catwalk show in 1981 (Kawamura 2004: 199–200), high fashion has been alert to the possibilities of decay and degradation as an aesthetic strategy. Arguably this high fashion approach was inspired by the punk subculture that arose in the second half of the previous decade, in which the ripped and torn garment became the badge of a crude (and some would say crudely playful) nihilism (Arnold 2001: 24). In the decades since, this strategy has reappeared in many different forms, from the 1980s street fashion for jeans worn through at the knee, to Hussein Chalayan, Martin Margiela, Alexander McQueen, and others' sophisticated explorations of the many ways in which the non-pristine surface can represent echoes of mortality, morbidity, and nostalgia. It has helped to fuel an ever-growing interest in vintage clothes, and the phenomenon of "new vintage," new clothes that look old (Cronberg 2006; de la Haye and Dingwall 1996; Evans 2003; Palmer and Clark 2004).²

This use of imperfect, worn, old or old-looking textiles has been associated with a wider strategy of "deconstruction" in fashion, gathering pace into the late 1980s and early 1990s (Arnold 2001: 25–6). As well as being subjected to artificial processes of wear and tear that break them down from a perfect "finished" state, garments have also been deliberately left unfinished, have had their usually hidden constructional elements turned to the outside and exposed, or have been created through the reassemblage of preexisting textiles or garments. The term deconstruction in fashion derives from a philosophical trend largely inspired by the work of Jacques Derrida, which in turn has

been associated with a broad cultural climate of "postmodernism" (Gill 1998). Although today the coherence or validity of postmodernism as a generally applicable cultural critique is open to question (Norris 1993: 18, 145–52), the use of distressed textiles in a playful, ironic or knowing manner to imbue garments with layers of meaning and a sense of complex historical quotation still continues. Caroline Evans has labeled this practice "dereliction" and, as already mentioned, it informs her analysis of a fashion system in which the past always returns to haunt the present (Evans 2003).

This deployment of the worn textile surface as a form of historical quotation is not, however, what this article is about. The deliberate achievement of a torn, frayed, or distressed look through artificial and accelerated means is very different from the sort of wear and tear that happens as a consequence of everyday life and the duration of time. It might reference the body and its processes, but it is not a direct result of them—rather, a *simulation*. I will concentrate on a historical period when no designer or manufacturer of clothing would ever have dreamed of sending out a garment that was less than pristine in its surface qualities, and when the overwhelming social norm was the assiduous maintenance of surface in textiles.³ In this context, the degraded surface usually represented just that; degradation, poverty, and destitution. In part, then, I have invoked the recent history of the "postmodern" deconstructed garment in order to clear it away from the space that this article intends to explore: we must forget the "shabby chic" of Margiela or Demeulemeester to

understand the rather different, more desperate and more serious, meanings of frayed and torn garments of an earlier period. Yet the two territories are nevertheless related: I would argue that a historical analysis specifically focused on the period immediately preceding the late twentieth century contributes to an understanding of the playful postmodern deployment of dirt and imperfection in fashion, because it is this history that gives modern deconstruction whatever frisson and power it possesses. The *artificially* frayed or worn garment seems “edgy” and interesting, with just a hint of rebellion against social norms, because of the memory of a time when the *authentically* frayed or worn garment signaled poverty and abjection. Yet it is precisely because wear and tear, in our affluent society, no longer have such a meaning, but only a memory of it, that they are able to become aestheticized, sanitized, absorbed into the fashion system rather than posing a threat to it. This, however, is a subtext, in an article that is chiefly concerned with the historically specific meanings of textiles and their surfaces from 1880–1939, a period during which the frayed and worn, or the finely maintained, textile object carried particularly potent cultural meaning.

Wear and Tear, Starch and Polish in Social Context

Although many of the ideas explored in this article could be relevant to other historical periods, both before and after the particular period under analysis here, my declared intention is to produce a watertight analysis for just this one (albeit relatively long)

moment in historical time, from the late nineteenth century through to the Second World War. Furthermore, my emphasis is specifically on *British* culture, material culture, and society of this period. What I will say about the importance of textile surfaces is set against the backdrop of a society deeply fissured by minute class distinctions, in which advances in material wealth were dramatic but very unevenly spread across the population, and in which the urban infrastructure was in the process of being renewed, yet only partially, by modernity.

According to many social historians, the late nineteenth century was the period when notions of class emerged in Britain in their modern form (Harris 1993: 6–11); despite structural changes into the twentieth century, and particularly the growth of the middle class, the existence of acute class stratification went largely unchallenged (McKibbin 1998). What it meant to belong to one class or another was increasingly expressed in material terms. This had long been the case for the upper reaches of society, but as living standards rose (albeit haltingly and patchily) for the working classes too from the late nineteenth century onwards (Boyer 2003), status was increasingly marked out in things owned, and, I would argue, the physical state (old or new, clean or dirty, well-maintained or battered) of these things. The 1880s and 1890s was the period when laundry soap, starch, and “blue” became branded, advertised, mass-market products, increasingly associated with social values (Kelley 2009). Perhaps not coincidentally, it was

also the moment when mass-market fashions began to be available and accessible to a wider segment of the population, a trend that continued into the twentieth century (Wilson 2005[1985]: 79). Yet such developments emerged alongside the persistence of serious poverty and deprivation (Boyer 2003). And if small portable consumer goods like soap and fashionable clothes were becoming more common, this was often within a setting of squalid, overcrowded, and decayed housing, the legacy of almost a century of rapid urbanization and industrial growth (Daunton 2000: 31–2). Legislative reform had an impact on housing standards in the pre-1914 period (Daunton 2000: 7), and suburbanization gathered pace into the 1920s and 1930s (although this process was halted in many areas when economic depression brought severe stagnation to the erstwhile industrial heartlands of the country) (McKibbin 1998: 112; Pooley 2000: 436–8). This dirty and decrepit infrastructure, as well as the persistence and even resurgence of serious poverty, influenced the way people felt about the surfaces of their personal possessions. The many social observers and explorers who investigated and documented the material conditions and social mores of the time consistently emphasized the importance of cleanliness and dirt, efforts at maintenance, or the squalor produced by neglect, in their accounts of class structure.

For illustration we can turn to an autobiographical account written by Grace Foakes, a dock laborer's daughter born in London in an East End tenement in the first years of the twentieth century (Foakes 1972,

1975). Early in her account Grace recalls her mother buying a bundle of worn and used baby clothes when a new baby was about to be born (Foakes 1972: 15). By the late 1920s, Grace herself, when her own first child was born, was able to afford to dress her in fine white bonnets trimmed with swansdown. Yet she was distressed by the dirt and soot that stained these bonnets after just a few hours in the smoky atmosphere of her home amongst the Wapping docks (Foakes 1975: 36). A move to a new council estate in Dagenham in Essex brought freedom from the dirt and decay of the inner city (Foakes 1972: 81–2, 1975: 37), and Foakes was able to express her pride and status in the state of the garments she pegged on her line each washing day:

Each house with its windows gleaming, its lawns neat and trim, its flowers and its trees. This was a clean new town and we were part of it. Our children could play in the garden while we women did our housework and washing, each taking pride as to who could make her whites look the whitest or her coloured clothes the most colourful. (Foakes 1975: 40–2)

Foakes and her family left their rented Dagenham home to take on a mortgage in nearby Hornchurch, yet their economic stability was threatened in the precarious economic conditions of the 1930s. Foakes's husband's wages were cut, and when he was injured in an industrial accident he found his earning power further reduced in a competitive labor market, and the family lost their home (Foakes

1975: 58–64). Foakes's experiences demonstrate the tension between material advance and the possibility of a return to poverty that form the particular background to social interpretations of the surface qualities of textiles at this period.

Surface Qualities and the Textile Object

The physical—visual, tactile—qualities of textiles are dependent upon a number of factors, the most important of which are fiber, yarn structure, weave structure, color (created by dyeing the yarn or finished cloth), and pattern (created at the weaving stage by the arrangement of different colored threads, or applied later through surface techniques of printing or other forms of embellishment). However other, less well-known, surface qualities are also important in giving different sorts of textiles their distinctive identities: I am thinking here of the contribution that various *finishing* techniques make to the texture, crispness or softness, body, luster or sheen of textiles. There are a number of evocative industry terms that conjure up the tactile qualities of textiles, examples being “handle” (in other words, what fabric feels like in the hand) and “loft” meaning lightness and fullness: these qualities are imparted by a combination of different factors amongst which surface finishing techniques are of vital importance.

Yet finishing techniques are not generally the subject of conscious scrutiny in the study of either textiles or fashion and clothing: textile historian Mary Schoeser identifies a list of surface treatments that includes

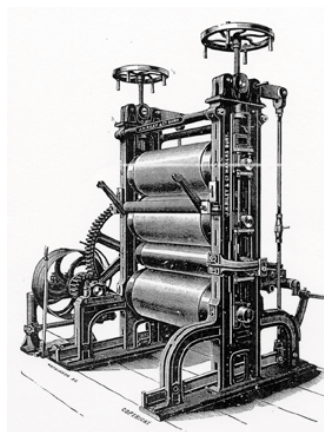


Figure 2
Four Bowl Soft Finish Calendar: "This gives the cloth a nice feel and smooth appearance, but less glaze than the heavier Calenders" [Dyer and Calico Printer (the editors of) 1907].

"rubberizing, metallizing, waxing, oiling, plasticizing, hot 'de-fuzzing', [and] mercerization" that, she says, have been shown "little attention" (Schoeser 2003: 191–2). I would add to this list more basic and commonplace processes such as bleaching, glazing, fulling, and pressing that contribute a great deal to the characteristics of textiles and garments, but that are not extensively considered in the secondary literature on textiles, and even less so in analyses of historical fashion. As already discussed, where processes overtly concerned with the textile surface are taken note of, it is usually in consideration of particular types of deconstructive finishing in recent and contemporary fashion. Yet historical fashion too owes much of its character to its surfaces: a source from 1899 notes simply that "all classes of fabrics alter in appearance, handle, and firmness of texture in the finishing processes" (Beaumont 1899[1887]: 450). The techniques involved are specific to particular fibers, and immensely varied in their methods and their results (see Figure 2). There are various secondary technical sources on the characteristics of textiles that set out details of fiber, weave structure, etc. in contemporary and historical textiles, and that also deal with surface treatment.⁴ There is also a relatively large trade literature dating from the period under discussion here that gives technical details of these processes. (Beaumont 1899[1887]; Edge 1911; Dyer and Calico Printer (the editors of) 1907) This is a large and complex subject and the comprehensive tabulation or description of all textile-finishing processes of the late nineteenth and early twentieth

centuries is well beyond the scope of this article. Here I introduce just a few relatively simple examples, which I hope will be sufficient to establish the importance of surface finish in consideration of textiles.

Both "woolen" and "worsted" fabrics are derived from sheep's wool (the two terms denote broad categories of wool fabric that share certain basic qualities; each group contains within it many subcategories of different sorts and grades of fabric, often denoted by specific names). Despite their common fiber, woolens and worsteds have very different qualities, differences that are heavily accentuated by the finishing processes to which they are subjected. Woolen fabric is soft and bulky, made from yarn quite loosely twisted from short-staple fibers and woven with a plain weave structure (Gioello 1982: 13). It thus contrasts with worsted, which is made from long-staple fibers, assiduously carded to align them along their length, spun with a tight twist and often woven with a twill structure (a weave structure incorporating filling yarns that produce a diagonal pattern), to give a close and hard, rather than soft and bulky, feel (Gioello 1982: 13). Finishing processes have long reinforced these contrasts: while worsteds are often steamed or singed to emphasize the crispness of their surface texture, woolens are "fulled." Fulling involves raising a nap and then shearing it back, a process that can be repeated several times, and results in a thickened, warmer cloth, given extra bulk, as well as softness and a porous quality that contrasts markedly with the tight, hard finish of worsteds (Crowfoot *et al.* 1992:

35–6). Fulling results in the warp and weft texture of the weave being heavily obscured by the nap raised over it: “as a woollen cloth is milled or fulled ... the thready surface which characterizes it on leaving the loom totally disappears ... causing the fabric to resemble a felted rather than a woven production” (Beaumont 1899[1887]: 450). Woolens, due to their softer surface, absorb dust and dirt more easily than worsteds, though worsteds *show* dirt more obviously on their tight surface. Woolens are less durable, becoming threadbare with time, though worsteds, while not actually wearing out so readily, can acquire a shiny look at stress points.

Cotton fabric was also heavily finished. A 1911 source identifies various substances added to the cloth in the final stages of manufacture, from softeners and conditioners (to “insure a smooth mellow feel, and add lustre and closeness of texture”) to starches and fillings (able to impart “any particular handle or feel, that may be required”) to antiseptics to prevent mildew, and “blue,” a mild solution of blue dye that counteracted the yellowing caused by the bleaching the fabric had been subjected to earlier in the process of manufacture (Edge 1911: 20–39). The discriminating use of such finishing processes helped to distinguish different types of fabric, and in addition a range of mechanical processes was employed, often in conjunction with the substances above. These included “scutching,” “stenting,” “singeing,” “beetling,” and “calendering,” as well as the use of mangles and drying machines (Edge 1911: 85–103). Calendaring was a process also applied to linen, the crisp texture and often lustrous

surface of which has traditionally been imparted by the application of heat and weight, through a smooth metal or glass implement, to impart a very particular sheen (Crowfoot *et al.* 1992: 81).

Such finishing processes are intrinsic to the manufacture of textiles; when a garment is subsequently constructed from lengths of new cloth, further finishing processes, and in particular pressing, add again to the surface integrity of the finished object. Yet the qualities that result are very fragile, prone to breaking down or being worn away in everyday use. This fragility is accentuated by the particular use to which garments and household textiles are put, specifically their proximity to both the body and the spaces and places that it inhabits. If textiles are given character by surface, they are also in and of themselves a surface that intercedes between the human body and the world outside it. They absorb from within secreted wastes, and from without the many different sorts of dirt that the external environment produces (in the period of this study this could include many varieties of industrial pollution, mud from the streets, ever-settling dust, and the smoke, soot and smuts of domestic coal fires) (Kelley 2009). And as well as dirt, garments are also a surface vulnerable to being rubbed and worn. Collars are abraded by stubbly chins and necks, socks worn through by rough shoes and sharp toenails, trousers holed in the seat and the knee by the constant pressure of being caught between the body inside and the hard rough surfaces of the external environment.

Yet qualities of finish in textiles, although fragile, can also be replenished or reapproximated.

Each of the industrial processes described above had a domestic equivalent, so that textile objects were constantly subjected to both dirt and wear and to deliberate, strenuous, often highly routinized or even ritualized processes to clean them and refinish their surfaces (see Figure 3). The soft deep pile produced by fulling could be brought back by brushing (which also removed dirt and dust). This technique, used regularly on woollen garments, was advocated in etiquette and household advice manuals and recalled in autobiographies of the time (Ezard 1979: 18; Foster and Walkley 1978: 33). The body, smoothness, and whiteness of new cotton was reapplied by a complex process of starching, blueing, mangling, and/or ironing. Linen was subject to similar treatment, with an added emphasis on glossing or glazing, to bring back its surface luster (Browne 1877: 191–3; Jack 1898). The fact that these replenishments took place in the domestic environment means that in the period under discussion in this article, the performance and results of this work were tangled in complicated ways with issues concerning women’s role in domestic labor, and with social position and status.

Textile objects are by their nature “soft,” more mutable than many other designed objects, and more vulnerable (partly because of their nature and partly because of the uses to which they are put) to degradation and dereliction. It is necessary at this stage to make a small but important distinction—there are two sets of paired categories intrinsic to this subject matter that I have not up to

this moment clearly disentangled. At one end of the scale (the end that could be identified as signaling either newness or strenuous efforts at upkeep) are both *cleanliness* and *maintenance*. Their opposites (being indicative of either age or neglect in textile objects) are *dirt* and *wear*. (For another recent treatment of cleanliness and dirt in the context of textiles, see Klepp 2007.)

While generally the two terms that cluster together at each end of the scale are closely associated, in some respects they operate differently, even contradicting each other, and particularly in the processes concerned with surface qualities. A dirtied cotton shirt, its whiteness spoiled by grime, is washed in order to reassert its pristine color—this is the work of cleanliness. After washing the shirt must also be ironed, to reassert its pristine texture—and this I would describe as the work of maintenance. In some circumstances the processes used to reestablish cleanliness might even interfere with the work of maintaining surface, putting the two principles into opposition. The cotton shirt, while made clean by being washed, will be even more crumpled as a result of the process than it was before, and wool fabric cannot usually be washed at all without running the risk of irreparable damage to its surface qualities. Even with fabrics that can be washed, this method of removing dirt can disrupt surface texture beyond just crumpling it. A series of Persil advertisements from the later 1930s makes this clear. Two young women wear identical checked blouses: “Judy’s

blouse is new ... Jane’s blouse has been washed dozens of times with Persil ... You can’t tell the difference between a new blouse and a Persil-washed blouse ... so next time you’re washing your silks and woollies use Persil, and see how soft and new looking it leaves them” (*Picture Post* December 17, 1938: 4). Making the distinction between the two related sets of principles—cleanliness/maintenance and dirt/wear—makes clear the extent to which the care of textiles in general, but particularly in the period under discussion here, is a complex system. Straightforward functional hygiene (cleanliness pure and simple) is not the only factor that must be considered; the symbolic aesthetic qualities of surface also require attention.

Boundaries, Systems, Abjection, and the Textile Surface

I would like here to introduce some theoretical considerations, in an effort to construct an apparatus that will allow a fuller understanding of the significance of textile surfaces, both in general but specifically for the 1880–1939 period under consideration. Both Mary Douglas and Julia Kristeva have written on the subject of dirt: I will take what they say and apply it to the dirt (and therefore also the cleanliness) of this particular place and period, as well as attempting to think how their ideas might impact upon the closely related but distinct categories of maintenance and wear. The thinking of these two theorists is related; in *Powers of Horror*, the essay in which she established most fully her concept of abjection, Kristeva drew quite

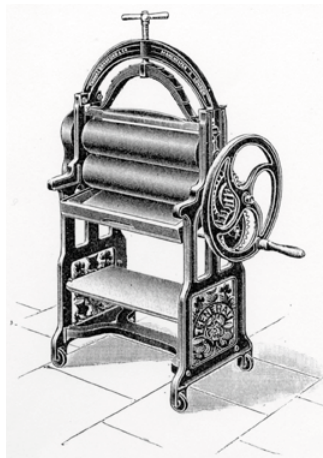


Figure 3
Domestic mangle (Marsh 1914).

heavily on Douglas's work (Douglas 1991[1966]; Kristeva 1982[1980]). However, in the end I will focus on the distinctions between their thought, in making a case for Douglas's approach (that stresses the social context) as being more relevant to this historical study than Kristeva's (that stresses individual or psychoanalytical motivation).

Mary Douglas's work in *Purity and Danger* gives a very useful foundation for understanding attitudes to the practices (and indeed the rituals) that are associated with cleanliness and dirt. The fact that *Purity and Danger* is still so widely cited some 40 odd years after it was first published is testimony to that usefulness. Douglas's intention in *Purity and Danger* (a work that blends anthropology with the comparative study of religion) was to explode what she saw as the myth that "primitive" religions frequently conflate the sacred and the unclean, introducing materials, actions or contacts that they see as unclean into their religious rituals. In the process, Douglas examines issues of purity and contagion, making a very strong case for them as an excellent way into understanding not just primitive religion, but also the "great" religions, and indeed many aspects of secular human society. At the heart of her argument is a consideration of the way that dirt can be defined as part of a *system*, and in turn helps to define that system: "I believe that ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience" (Douglas 1991[1966]: 4). Thus dirt is essentially "matter out of place,"

the category of what is left over once the world has been systematically ordered. Its definition as such is a powerful tool in the construction of cosmologies—ideas about how the world should be. Douglas's emphasis on systems leads her to stress the importance of those boundaries and margins without which no system can function. She further asserts that "all margins are dangerous," as "any structure of ideas is vulnerable at its margins." And she notes the centrality of bodily margins in many of the rituals that build and support social structures in the case study material she considers. Bodily orifices represent the body's margins, and "matter issuing from them is marginal stuff of the most obvious kind" (Douglas 1991[1966]: 122).

Now, is it too obvious to say here that what issues from the body's margins (including that grandly marginal organ, the skin), is usually mopped up by clothing or a textile object of some sort? Joanne Entwistle has attempted, through the methodologies of sociology, to uncover the often neglected *bodily* nature of fashion and clothing, the study of which is frequently dominated by an emphasis on image and representation that de-emphasizes the real body. Entwistle asserts the role that garments play in mediating "the meeting place of the private and the public ... the intimate experience of the body and the public realm" (Entwistle 2000: 7). Clothing covers the body, represents it to the outside world, *and can even stand in for it*—skin and cloth are not infrequently conflated. An example of this is Georges Vigarello's analysis of how, in courtly society in seventeenth-century France, the

wearing of white linen under rich outer clothes represented the skin within, so that the ritualized changing of the linen as it became dirtied by the skin's excretions achieved, both literally and metaphorically, a gesture of cleanliness (Vigarello 1988[1985]: 228).

Julia Kristeva is also concerned with boundaries and margins in her category of the "abject": "it is ... not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (Kristeva 1982[1980]: 4). Kristeva's motivation is essentially a psychoanalytical one, and she is most concerned with maternity, and the threat to the discrete identity of subject and object posed in the processes of pregnancy and childbirth. Judith Butler characterizes Kristeva's idea of abjection thus:

The "abject" designates that which has been expelled from the body, discharged as excrement, literally rendered "Other" ... The boundary of the body as well as the distinction between internal and external is established through the ejection and transvaluation of something originally part of identity in a defiling otherness. (Butler 1999[1990]: 170)

And this seems to tally quite clearly with the link already made above between the textile object and the body's dirt. Clothing and household textiles such as bed linen and table linen that also, like clothing, function in intimate contact with the body, are subject to dirt coming

from the body within, and this sort of dirt might be said to be *abject* dirt, where what is within the body or of the body becomes without or separate, in which case it immediately seems anomalous and distasteful or even disquieting.

Douglas and Kristeva deal with dirt; they do not make overt reference to worn or torn or frayed garments. Yet I would argue that the ideas discussed above are applicable here too. Just as dirty garments are, to use Kristeva's term, "abject," so too are frayed garments. Clothing is positioned at that vulnerable margin between the world and the body. Qualities of finish preserve the integrity of garments, but once that finish begins to break down, even if dirt is removed, abjection still lingers. This is the case with crumpling and creasing, and even more so with fraying, that reveals the textile structure beneath the finish even as that structure of warp and weft begins to disintegrate. *Systems* are broken down and time is allowed in. Boundaries are damaged. This dissolution of system is made all the more obvious because textile objects are so systematic in their construction: "weaving can be described as a sort of soft-engineering, with its system of warp and weft comparable to the binary code of modern computer programming" (Robertson 2005: 299). It only takes one broken thread for the integrity of the whole object to be threatened in a process of unraveling. It has already been noted that recent and contemporary designers play with references to wear and frays. While the frays may be physically "real" (though artificially achieved), the dirt that often accompanies wear is more judiciously handled, and the

citation of human waste products, in particular, is avoided. The "abjection" of dirty garments still retains some of its ability to provoke disquiet.

Are Douglas and Kristeva's ideas a good basis for understanding the extreme attention to textile surfaces (distaste at the dirty and degraded, fanaticism in pursuit of the clean and pristine) that seems to be a characteristic of the 1880–1939 period? I would argue that, for all the psychological drama of Kristeva's approach, Douglas is the more useful in this context. She deplores the fact that many interpreters, when looking at religious ritual, have jumped from any ceremony that involves the body, to a concentration on the individual (taking "body" to mean "individual") and thus have turned to psychoanalytical rather than social explanations for what they observe. Douglas makes this point quite snippily ("public rituals enacted on the human body are taken to express personal and private concerns. There is no possible justification for this shift of interpretation just because the rituals work upon human flesh"; Douglas 1991[1966]: 116). Yet this does not seem to have deterred Kristeva from doing what Douglas warns against, using Douglas as one of the springboards for her psychoanalytical approach. For the period under discussion here, to follow Douglas into a consideration of the social meanings of the clean and dirty, maintained or worn textile surface does seem to match the evidence on offer better than Kristeva's thinking, despite the aptness of Kristeva's "abjection." I return here to Jack London, cited in the introduction: London describes his reaction to the rough, dirty clothes of his disguise in social

terms, not personal ones. He is more interested in the way these clothes make others see him than in the way they make him feel, and particularly refers to the way his disguise allows him to move across class boundaries:

No sooner was I out on the streets than I was impressed by the difference in status effected by my clothes. All servility vanished from the demeanour of the common people with whom I came in contact. Presto! in the twinkling of an eye, so to say, I had become one of them. My frayed and out-at-elbows jacket was the badge and advertisement of my class, which was their class. It made me of like kind, and in place of the fawning and too-respectful attention I had hitherto received, I now shared with them a comradeship. The man in corduroy and dirty neckerchief no longer addressed me as “sir” or “governor”. It was “mate”, now—and a fine and hearty word, with a tingle to it, and a warmth and gladness, which the other term does not possess. (London 1903: 12–13)

Writing 30 years later, George Orwell, in *Down and Out in Paris and London*, was remarkably consistent with this approach: the stated primary objective of both Jack London and Orwell in their adventures with poverty was to understand society, and not to investigate themselves (Ingle 2006: 47–8). Like London, Orwell, as part of his experiment in living amongst the lowest strata of society, swapped good clothes for worn and dirty ones at the shop of an old clothes dealer:

The clothes were a coat, once dark brown, a pair of black dungaree trousers, a scarf and a cloth cap. I had kept my own shirt, socks and boots, and I had a comb and razor in my pocket. It gives one a very strange feeling to be wearing such clothes. I had worn bad enough things before, but nothing at all like these; they were not merely dirty and shapeless, they had—how is one to express it?—a gracelessness, a patina of antique filth, quite different from mere shabbiness. (Orwell 2003[1933]: 137)

Orwell's initial reaction was to record how these clothes, with their distasteful patina, provoked in him a sense of “shame,” so that he felt “genuinely degraded” (Orwell 2003[1933]: 138). Yet, like London, he quickly linked this to the social perceptions of those around him, and he also, like London, described how ordinary men on the street now called him “mate” (Orwell 2003[1933]: 137).

Surfaces and Social Distinction

In the particular historical moment with which this article is concerned, a Britain characterized by economic and social inequality in which boundary maintenance and status were heavily emphasized, Douglas's ideas seem particularly applicable, and perhaps help to explain an emphasis not just on functional cleanliness in textile objects, but also a semi-ritualistic attachment to highly finished surfaces. This pursuit of the pristine surface demanded both time and labor, and was thus both directly and indirectly dependent on economic capital. Its reverse was the particular degradation and shame reported by or on behalf of those whose

economic and social resources did not allow them to participate in the maintenance of surface.

The period with which I am concerned was thus a period when the surface was invested with enormous social and symbolic importance. To wear clothes whose surfaces were decrepit or neglected was an eloquent sign of poverty and despair. I have already cited George Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London*: throughout this account of poverty-stricken life in the 1930s, Orwell makes frequent reference to worn and dirty garments and textiles; worn collars, frayed trousers and out-at-elbow coats, holed socks, leaking shoes, and sheets gray and stinking from long use and lack of washing (Orwell 2003[1933]: 20, 26, 28, 32, 36, 51, 177, 198). Orwell also describes his friend Boris, an unemployed waiter in Paris. At the point at which we meet him, Boris is destitute and has recently been homeless. However, the chance of a job drives him to extraordinary efforts to disguise his ragged state, to the extent of inking in the flesh revealed by the holes in his socks, to give at least a surface impression of social and economic competence (Orwell 2003[1933]: 28).

At the opposite end of the cleanliness/maintenance and dirt/wear scale is F. L. Calder and E. E. Mann's school textbook, *Elementary Laundry Work*. This source demonstrates what might almost be described as fanaticism for the pristine surface, in, for instance, a section that outlines the complex processes necessary to the washing and finishing of table linen and “body linen” (undergarments and shirts). I briefly outlined this process earlier, but it is worth



Figure 4
Photographer unknown, "The Salvation Army" (*Picture Post* December 10, 1938). © Getty Images.



Figure 5
Photographer unknown, "The Salvation Army." Bill Smith is the figure on the right: the caption explains how "the first thing a man does on entering a Salvation Army hostel is to have a thorough wash with hot water and soap" (*Picture Post* December 10, 1938). © Getty Images.

here revisiting its complexity, and the way in which it is didactically prescribed. The steps outlined include not just washing and drying but also meticulous finishing processes: cleanliness is important, but beyond this, actions are specified that are concerned with achieving a certain surface texture and integrity. The addition of "blue" to the final rinsing water to counteract the yellowing produced by the use of soap is demanded, as is starch to restore the crispness of the fabric, with a stronger or weaker solution recommended depending on the nature of the article and the effect required (Calder and Mann 1891). After drying and ironing, the final step these authors describe is an arduous glazing process, repeating at home a professional manufacturing technique:

When plainly ironed lay the article on the table right side up, and rub over smoothly with a damp rag. Take a bright and well-heated polisher or glossing iron and rub over the surface to be polished, leaning heavily, and rubbing backwards and forwards over a small surface, till the desired brightness is obtained ... the finer the linen the more brilliant the gloss. (Calder and Mann 1891: 58)

And other advice books of the period recommend similarly labor-intensive processes in the washing and "getting up" of cotton summer dresses, for instance (Calder and Mann 1891; Jack 1898). Women's linen or cotton "washing dresses," men's white shirts and their stiff detachable collars, maids' caps and aprons, babies' frocks, and girls' pinafores

from the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries all demanded work and skill in the maintenance and replenishment of their surface qualities (Foster and Walkley 1978). And although in the latter part of this period changing fashions and the introduction of new synthetic fabrics were beginning to counter some of the stiffness of the Victorian and Edwardian aesthetic, in comparison to later periods an emphasis on hard-won finish remained predominant (Handley 1999: 30–50; Wilson 2005[1985]: 40–3). In the present day, we are habituated to easy-care fabrics, soft jerseys, and crease-resistant synthetic blends. Contemporary fashion embraces the soft, the unstructured, and the informal, borrows from work-wear, and has learned from deconstruction the aesthetic possibilities of wear and benign neglect. From this perspective, it is easy to overlook the labor involved in the maintenance of textiles to a more exacting standard of perfection.

The importance attached to such perfection is reinforced when we examine the ways in which representations of clean or dirty, maintained or worn garments are woven into the moral discourses surrounding poverty and wealth. Orwell (and Jack London) described, in reasonably dispassionate terms, worn and dirty clothing as a material sign of poverty and despair. Yet the contrast between ragged, dirty poverty and sleek, clean prosperity had already been used many times before this as a consciously manufactured cliché in stories of redemption from destitution. A well-known example is cited by photographic

historian John Tagg: in the 1870s Thomas Barnardo used faked before-and-after photographs of homeless children given shelter in his children's homes, deliberately exaggerating their transformation from dirt-smear, ragged urchins into neat and cared-for objects of Victorian philanthropy (Tagg 1993: 83–5). Continuing in this long tradition is a photo-story from *Picture Post* magazine from 1938. An article about the Salvation Army is illustrated with the story of one Bill Smith, staged as a narrative of redemption in 14 frames, and looking suspiciously as though it has been posed from start to finish (see Figures 4 and 5).

Smith is shown initially as a homeless, jobless derelict dressed in ragged clothes. He is pictured as he is taken into a Salvation Army hostel, shaved, bathed, and given new clothes, food, and a bed with clean sheets. He joins in evening prayers, and “after a week or two ... the brigadier succeeds in finding him a job.” Frame 14 shows Smith, wearing a new suit, walking away from the hostel down the street: “and now, built up in health, decently dressed, and with confidence restored, Bill Smith goes out to his new job—one of more than 100,000 men for whom the Salvation Army finds work in a year” (*Picture Post* December 10, 1938: 25–32).

These last two examples are photographic representations: using photographic evidence compounds and complicates the issue of surfaces in some potentially interesting ways, because photographs are themselves a surface, and one that can be consciously manipulated. I cited Bill

Brandt's photograph of servants at the outset: many other photographs by Brandt suggest strongly that he was interested in surface qualities (textile and other) and their implication in the social contrasts and peculiarities he depicted as an émigré photographer in Britain in the 1930s. Raymond Mortimer, in his introduction to Brandt's 1936 book of photographs, *The English At Home*, described Brandt as both an artist, with “the artist's faculty for being surprised and excited by things other people would not notice,” and an anthropologist, who “seems to have wandered about England with the detached curiosity of a man investigating the customs of some remote and unfamiliar tribe” (Mortimer 1936: 4). Photographs such as Figure 1 indicate a complex engagement with the interactions between the material and the social worlds (although Brandt was by no means interested in a simplistic or polemical portrayal of the contrasts between wealth and poverty) (Lifson 1989: 264–5). Yet the “descriptions” of surfaces that Brandt's photographs contain have qualities that are dependent as much upon darkroom processes as upon the material objects that Brandt photographed. Despite the clarity and precise detail of Figure 1, Brandt preferred many of his prints to be “dark and muddy,” and many of his photographs of this period, especially as they appeared printed quite cheaply in periodicals such as *Picture Post*, have a grimy quality about them (Warburton 1999: 319). The fact that not all of his photographs portray surface detail so deliberately would seem to suggest that in Figure 1,

Brandt deployed polish and shine consciously, almost rhetorically, as socially expressive material qualities.

The written description and visual manipulation or exaggeration of raggedness and dirt confirm the social power of the textile surface: social distinctions were marked out by the quality, age, state of cleanliness, and state of maintenance of garments and textiles, in a system of values that had great normative power.

Concluding Speculation: Surface, Romanticism, and Modernity

Mary Douglas, as has already been noted, identifies margins and boundaries as the points at which any system is at its weakest. Yet Douglas also asserts the creative power that can accrue to margins. In the final chapter of *Purity and Danger*, “The System Shattered and Renewed,” she uses the wonderful phrase “composting religion” to describe those faiths that incorporate pollution or broken taboos into their religious rituals, symbolically recycling anomalous or transgressive objects, substances or actions. (Douglas 1991[1966]: 164). This acknowledgment of the possibility of a challenge to the social system ultimately reaffirms that system's power.

Up to this point I have cited literature or photographic representations that describe the dirty ragged garments associated with poverty, destitution and dereliction as evidence of a social system that valued the pristine textile surface. However, might it be possible to identify,

functioning alongside these values, a countervailing tendency to be fascinated by or even take delight in dereliction, as an example of Douglas's "system shattered and renewed," and here specifically symptomatic of a reaction to modernity, rather than the postmodernity that is the context to dereliction in late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century fashion? There is some evidence of a minority tendency for the deployment of dirty and worn clothing as a conscious strategy, almost a rebellion, or a refusal. Elizabeth Wilson, in her work on Bohemians (artistic and literary alternative subcultures), notes that:

... if the bohemian artist looked unkempt, it was not just that he was wearing his oil and paint-stained clothes, or even just that he was penniless: he was telling the world of his defiance, of his dissent from bourgeois values and of his poverty therefore as a moral rather than an economic condition. (Wilson 2000: 162)

George Orwell and Jack London's well-known and politically outspoken attempts to draw attention to poverty and its indignities were not the only empathetic accounts of destitute life produced in the period under discussion here:⁵ "there is also a more general literature on the tramp and the gypsy that dates back to the mid-nineteenth century, and that had a resurgence in the early years of the twentieth" (Nord 2006). One of the best known of these accounts is WH Davies's 1908 *The Autobiography of a Super-Tramp*, a book that describes, critiques, but also to an extent celebrates the freedoms

of tramp life (Davies 1908). Davies is probably best remembered today as a poet, and specifically as the author of the popular verse "Leisure": "What is this life if, full of care, We have no time to stand and stare" (Davies 1985: 51). The poem consciously embodies nostalgia for a time before modernity had made the pace of modern life fast and furious. In *The Autobiography of a Super-Tramp*, Davies describes a fellow tramp who took his disdain for the domestic norms and rituals associated with the maintenance of the textile object to an almost perverse extreme, rejecting not cleanliness and maintenance *per se*, but the *work* taken to achieve them (and preferring instead systematic begging):

Rather than wash a good handkerchief he would beg an old one that was clean, and he would without compunction discard a good shirt altogether rather than sew a button on—thus keeping up the dignity of his profession to the extreme. (Davies 1908: 24)

The following is a description of another of Davies's companions on the road:

an apparently tall man and large in proportion, who was dressed in seedy looking clothes, which were torn and patched in a good many places. In fact, something seemed to have been gnawing night after night at the bottom of his trousers, taking advantage of him in his sleep, for these hung in tatters and rags just below the calves of his legs. (Davies 1908: 197)

Much other tramp literature (as indeed the gypsy literature of the nineteenth century) consciously identified the vagrant life with the

romantic tradition and a resistance to modernity. Stephen Graham's *A Tramp's Sketches* (1912) is the record of a journey around the shores of the Black Sea, through Russia, to Jerusalem: his final chapter asserts that "the great fact of the human world to-day is the tremendous commercial machine that is grinding out at a marvelous acceleration the smaller and meaner sort of man," and his journey is described as a conscious, somewhat mystical, attempt to find an alternative to life in such a world (Graham 1912: 330). Deborah Epstein Nord, in her history of the gypsies, has noted that literature on the houseless life "could remind modern men and women of a time before the corruptions of modernity corroded their souls" (Nord 2006: 9).

Mary Douglas notes that, "though it is only specific individuals on specified occasions who can break the rules, it is still important to ask why these dangerous contacts are often required in rituals" (Douglas 1991[1966]: 161). Could it be that the presence of dirty and decrepit clothing, and even a romantic indulgence of it in the figure of the tramp, ultimately served as a powerful reaffirmation of the norm of the clean and maintained textile object, and also of modernity? This was not a "playful" phenomenon, and nor was it directly embedded in the fashion system that has embraced the citation of artificial wear and tear in recent years. Rather it stood to one side, as a negative affirmation of deadly serious social values, expressed in material terms. Full exploration of this concluding speculation is beyond the scope of this article, but

I offer it as an indication of territory yet to explore in the understanding of textiles and their surfaces.

Notes

1. This ambivalence is reflected in historical attitudes to the domestic work of cleanliness traditionally carried out by women: such work is often seen as a mark of virtue, its neglect the sign of a bad wife or uncaring mother. Yet women have also been under considerable pressure to keep this work, if not its results, invisible. Too conspicuous a concern with cleanliness is interpreted as a sign of sterility or frigidity, a refusal of the larger concerns of life in favour of trivial domestic minutiae (see Kelley 2009).
2. Although unfortunately unpublished, Cronberg's dissertation is, in my opinion, the best work on "new vintage."
3. Rebecca Arnold has noted Schiaparelli's Tear Dress as an example of "imperfection" from a much earlier period. However, what is notable about that dress, from the point of view of this article, is that, although it has tears depicted on its surface, it is *not actually torn* (Arnold 2001: 24).
4. See for instance Emery (1980[1966]), the primary aim of which is to establish consistent technical classifications of textiles for museum curators and conservators. Gioello (1982) is a useful technical overview intended more for contemporary textile designers and manufacturers, as well

as designers and technicians working with finished textiles. See also Schick (1975/1977).

5. For a round up of other, earlier accounts, see Freeman (2001, 2003). For a taste of some of these accounts, see Keating (1976).

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