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YOU CAN(NOT) RE-DRESS

On October 4, 1995, *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, which takes place in the year 2015, began its original twenty-six-episode run, airing on the channel TV Tokyo. The character Asuka Langley Sohryu arrives more than a quarter of the way through, with a United Nations fleet escorting her and a very large machine across the Pacific Ocean to Japan all the way from Germany. Per *Evangelion* canon, Asuka is born on December 4, 2001—a fire sign—making her thirteen or fourteen years old at the time of her debut. She is American, though ethnically German, and Japanese, with red hair.

Pantone's color of the year for 2002 was "True Red," purportedly as a strangely, literal sort of commemoration of 9/11. I can believe it, since American tributes are often pretty on the nose.

Asuka is not especially affable, and seems to think highly of herself. When she first dons a suit for work—a full-body casing of red, with black and green accents, which can be suctioned on skin-tight, thus turning her into something of a vacuum-formed sculpture to be plugged into the cockpit of Unit-02, her monstrous machine—she readies for her task by addressing herself in the third person: "Asuka, let's go."

Yes, there's an inscrutable, destructive being from another world to defeat, but the mission is essentially to be herself—to win, and show her talent. She's been preparing for such a scenario for years; action is a theater and she wants to perform on the stage. She aims to prove herself a victor, and her time, and art, is one of war. Too young for strategic thinking, she relies on sheer aggression and relentlessness instead. It almost goes without saying that her first engagement doesn't go according to plan. A boy who's ostensibly the main character of the story is there to help. This is surely not what she had in mind. In the manga's version of the same event, she wins by herself, handily, in no time: it takes only thirty-six seconds to annihilate her target.

Even at rest, which is for her a series of passages between strident and/or violent actions, she usually keeps part of her uniform on: a small pair of scarlet devices employed as hair clips. No AirPods in this future(past), just pods held aloft. She appears otherwise—in a school uniform, a cream-colored dress, bath towels—but these ornaments of mysterious utility are fairly constant. Beneath the clips is her copper mane, under which lies the mind of a bitch who never rests. Facsimiles of the hair accessory have been available for any number of years online, ranging from \$15.75 to over \$100 USD, but made a special guest appearance in a music video from August 4, 2020 for Atlanta rapper 645AR's track "Sum Bout U," featuring FKA twigs. Twigs plays a camgirl, and 645AR breaks out his credit card number to get access to a striptease where the look is clearly a homage to Asuka's battle regalia. Here the look is edited into an ensemble of custom gloves and bra from latex couturier Atsuko Kudo, as well as a pair of "Geisha Custom Fire Duffles Boots" by self-proclaimed humanoid android designer Christian Stone, who apparently works with a team of thirteen mutants. It's not cultural appropriation at this point—it's culture.

The End of Evangelion, a film that reimagines the final episodes of the *Neon Genesis Evangelion* television anime series, was released on July 19, 1997. Roughly halfway through the film, a previously suicidal Asuka Langley Sohryu chooses life once more, and resurrects herself, plugged into her war machine, from the very bottom of a body of water to create a mêlée of destruction and fire before being ripped limb from limb and eaten alive by a series of nine handily self-resurrecting white angels, all of which she had previously defeated in three-and-a-half minutes. During the period when it seems like she's winning, "Orchestral Suite No. 3 In D Major, BWV. 1068: II. Air," a ca. 1730 composition by Johann Sebastian Bach, scores the scene. The climax of the film is a world-annihilating apocalypse, engineered with the intention of total singularity, called "Third Impact." A passage from Sylvia Plath's 1963 poem "Ariel" comes to mind:

The dew that flies
Suicidal, at one with the drive
Into the red . . .

Two years after writing an editorial for an online fashion retailer in which I lodged a recommendation for Simone Rocha crystal hair clips to aid in emulating Asuka's work/life look, the H&M x Simone Rocha collection ^{fig 1} dropped on March 11, 2021, and included a pair of poppy-red crystal glass bead-embellished steel clips. The embellishments resemble small bouquets. Fair enough—it's stimulating to ride the same wave as commercial behemoths, sometimes. Then things escalated: in designer Jun Takahashi's Fall 2021 Undercover ^{fig 2} ready-to-wear collection "Creep

Very," shown at Tokyo Fashion Week on March 19, look 16 was Asuka's plugsuit as streetwear: leggings, boots, gloves, and a long sweatshirt with sections sewn in recall of her original suit's complicated dart lines. And hair clips, of course, practically speaking indistinguishable from a cosplay item.

The next day, a new wave of collaboration between Vivienne Westwood and the Japanese sports brand Asics yielded the release of the Gel-Kayano 27 LTX ^{fig 3} in citrus, a dead ringer for the refreshed color palette of Asuka's plugsuit design for the recent remaking of *Evangelion* as a number of films collectively known as the "Rebuild" series, the individual titles of which often declare contradictions by way of a parenthetical phrase, e.g. 2012's *Evangelion: 3.0 You Can (Not) Redo*. To top it off, on May 27 of this year, Anna Sui announced a new collab: just two t-shirts ^{fig 4}, and one bears the vermilion head of Unit-02. The final entry in the "Rebuild" saga was released on March 8, 2021, in Japan, where some Anna Sui products are manufactured. The industriousness of the zeitgeist can resemble something of a conspiracy.

Pantone's color of the year for 2012 was "Tangerine Tango," ^{fig 5} described by the Pantone Color Institute as "a spirited reddish orange." On October 22, 2012, famous Sagittarian Taylor Swift's fourth studio album, *Red*, ^{fig 6} was released on Big Machine Records. Her favorite number, as she has constantly reminded people, is thirteen.

In place of direct references, allusions can sometimes creep in, verily unbidden. On February 12, 2021, I bought off of eBay a pair of red Nike *Huaraches* with the word *AIR* molded into raised plastic at the heel. Nike, we may recall, was in Greek myth a goddess of victory, a kind of mediator figure between the divine and men.

Consulting the few color photographs of Sylvia Plath, it would seem unfair to claim she had red hair, though it seems common to make another erroneous claim—that her late work is "confessional." What, exactly, she was guilty of, though, I've never heard articulated. A word's very definition seems likelier to change over time than poor reactions projected dimly in a cheap theater of reputations. Here's a better legend: In the fall of 1962, specifically during the last week of October when she turned thirty, Sylvia honed eleven poems, including the first drafts of "Lady Lazarus," the title of which alludes to the biblical account in the Gospel of John of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. This is the seventh and final miracle performed by Jesus leading up to the Crucifixion, and a foreshadowing of Jesus's own subsequent resurrection and three further appearances on Earth.

The full poem appeared for the first time in print a year later, October 1963, in the publications *Review* and *Encounter*. In it, there is burning, ash, and rising again with red hair.

What kind of mind would think of such imagery as confessional, in its definitional sense of reconciliation? If the "I" is limited to the personal, which apparently is the same as saying "I confess . . ." then by way of that careless reasoning, let's go ahead and claim Sylvia had red hair, and that even Lady Lazarus would eat all the angels, like air. She would be the main character, with victory in thirty-one seconds or less.

Regarding the first person, consider the "I want" song—a traditional device in musical theater to spell out a character's motivations. Playwright and lyricist Howard Ashman wrote at least one, in 1986, which later becomes "Part of Your World," a centerpiece of Walt Disney Animation's 1989 comeback film *The Little Mermaid*, ^{fig 7} based on the Danish writer Hans Christian Anderson's folk tale with songs and music by Ashman in collaboration with Alan Menken. Former Disney chairman Jeffrey Katzenberg wanted it cut from the film. Ashman's counterpoint was as such: "It's [Ariel's] dream. You're not going to miss what the film's about. That's the central issue of the entire film. By having her sing it, it makes that point indelibly." She says: "I want more," and this is the language of revelation, not confession. Expressing her desire to live out of the water, the main character, Ariel, framed by a mass of cherry-colored hair, lodges this query, which I interpret as essentially rhetorical:

What's a fire and why does it
(What's the word?)
Burn?

Asuka, I suspect, would not reflect on such a thing. The question is slow, and she is tightly encased in that suit, squeezing herself into pressurized, forward momentum. A physicist would say that if a book is thrown onto a fire, the resulting ash would retain information from the original. But the problem for the would-be reader is illegibility—what's now left of the record has to in some sense be taken on trust. Believe science. Or, out of ash, could one fashion a phoenix? And what of the truths revealed by the fictions that run parallel to facts, until some collision? Where do the dead fall in all this, and where does their information go?

On March 14, 1991, Ashman dies of AIDS
in Beacon, New York.

In a May 2001 interview in Venice Beach, California—which turned out to be the last before he killed himself in 2003—the artist Jack Goldstein commented on the writing process for his late work: “I see reading and writing to be a respeaking and rewriting. When I read I’m rewriting what someone else wrote. All of us do.” Elsewhere in the same interview, he asserted: “You fight for the right to make art. It’s frightening but it’s true.” Of *Burning Window*,^{fig 8} a 1977 installation—which includes a backlit ruby-colored, four-paned installation of a Plexiglas casement, which simulates a world on fire, at a distance—he said, “This spectacle, which may be felt ambiguously both ‘real’ and as a ‘cinematic’ illusion, calls into question the ‘truth’ of visual experience.”

What is the truth of this seeing Asuka everywhere, like a bias coloring reality? Once the thought of Asuka standing, smoldering in expression and image, in front of this window occurs, the relationship between the two is fired and burnished. This is part of the spectacle of my thought process—and my thinking is part of the spectacle. The phenomenal can be made factual. But rather than taking such as an answer, an inherently meaningful sign, as a true conspiracist might, why not let it be a question?

Here’s one: how real can she be?

Hayley Williams^{fig 9} doesn’t really do hair accessories so much, but some of her red-letter days in the otherwise mostly irredeemable heyday of the *Warped Tour* included a sharp and angular vermillion cut. She sells the look now not much on herself, but in a bottled color called “Riot,” a less intense version of which she sported on a 2009 tour in Japan. There she is on stage at Summer Sonic, wearing a version of a Japanese school uniform, singing “Decode.” This is what I imagine Asuka would have looked like in her own show, like a real person. And didn’t the algorithm on YouTube show me this for a reason? Isn’t this complex system of content coordination saying, “Was this the world you wanted?” Reality retreats, visibility is exploited, and in some devastated sense, I do feel seen.

Modernism helped set up a few fissures in the conception of time and space, and the number one song in America on the Billboard Hot 100 chart as of this writing is Olivia Rodrigo’s “Good 4 U” (2021), but you’ve heard it before, as Paramore’s “Misery Business” (2007). Rodrigo’s singing style is also often a dead ringer for that of 2013’s breakout star Lorde.

Coincidentally, Lorde is missing in action, and Williams refuses to play her song anymore, leaving room for “Good 4 U” to rule, and even become an updated classic. Here’s another: the first section of T. S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets*, “Burnt Norton.” Set in the rose garden of the house, it opens

with the following lines: “Time present and time past / Are both perhaps present in time future,” which, since September 2015, I can only hear in Lana Del Rey’s voice. We can have our time past, and eat it too. And who’s to say Rodrigo won’t do an anime girl’s look for an upcoming video, maybe, say, Asuka’s? Red, skin-tight, whatever, the reference won’t matter; Kandinsky-style color theory will win the day: the Passion of what’s up. She’s already wearing latex gloves in the “Good 4 U” music video while shopping for gasoline canisters. Strike a match and the ouroboros swells.

In Eliot’s book, the last poem, “Little Gidding,” ends as follows: “And the fire and the rose are one.” Realizing a thesis in time is something like a battle—for the rose and fire to become one, territory has to be covered, even earth scorched. To say something with flowers, let a hundred or so bloom—then there’ll be more ash to work with. There’s a swimsuit version of Asuka’s plugsuit—the front is covered, the back is cut out—in which one could feasibly swim to the very bottom of a body of water, and rise again.

This will be a performance,
and it will (not) take place.
Let’s go.