

A Mint-coloured Milkmaid Top

I find it difficult to find a suitable rhythm when analyzing a garment; a rhythm that allows for criticism but also celebration, a rhythm that oscillates between critical distance and immanent complicity. I guess that's what's attractive about the notion of fashion criticism, precisely this inability to escape its tentacles. Firmly rooted in daily life, a key component to everyone's daily routines and strategies, fashion is more entangled with reality than most other aesthetic forms. It is, therefore, virtually impossible to come to a transcendent conclusion when discussing fashion. Instead, I like to depart from the tangible reality of a material garment, scanning it for clues about its design, production, social, and cultural significance in the hemlines and fibres themselves, even if consistently failing to reach a solid conclusion.

I Saw It First Mint Milkmaid Crop Top was how my garment came advertised on eBay. The girl who sold it to me said it no longer fit her and that someone else might get more use out of it. Turns out, I wouldn't fit the top either, but it caught my attention during one of my lengthy scroll sessions. I guess what drew me in was its undeniable flimsiness, a quality of material so tenuous that it even translated into a 500x500 pixel image. I could tell the fabric was some kind of manmade fibre, most likely polyester. A light ruffle decorated the iconic bell sleeve that accompanies most attire described as "milkmaid," and was the only thing that distinguished this top from a bra or bustier. The top arrived a few days later, packed in a repurposed Zara bag and layers of duct tape. The design was simple: 2 half circles sewn together as breast cups, large bell sleeves that were ruffled at the edges with a thin strip of elastic band, no lining, and finished with various over and baby-lock stitches. At points the seams swirled from one side to the other, missing the hemline by as much as a centimeter, creating thick overlaps of lock stitches under the armpits. On the interior of the top, the edges of the fabric were in the process of unraveling where the overlocker failed to tuck them under its hems, creating a myriad of loose threads and swirling stitches.

Consumption, to some degree, also means destruction. The word can refer to the action of using up a resource, but can also mean, "destruction by use" when referred to by its Latin origin. I'm moving my small pair of scissors under the overlock stitch that attaches the left bra cup to the bustier, snipping first the outer threads that weave themselves around the edges of the fabric, then moving inwards to the



Scanned part of deconstructed garment, Courtesy of artist.

"Consumption, to some degree, also means destruction"

straight stitch. It comes apart easily under the metal of my kitchen scissors and some of the thread comes away with a light pull, leaving tiny holes where the needle penetrates the fabric. As the cup comes undone and I fold it inside out, I notice the thread used for the lockstitch in the lining is white and of inferior quality to the mint green thread used on the exterior. The tension is also quite loose, and I wonder if they used a different machine for this job. Perhaps the bust cups were stitched by one garment worker who passes the bulk of them onto the next one, who sews them into the bustier.

There are many systems in which garment factories divide the workload amongst their laborers, one of them being the CTM (Cut Make Trim) method. The CTM service is provided by garment production factories that cut the patterns, sew the garment, and trim the threads. The workers focus solely on one aspect of the garment production, sewing on back pockets or button loops, or snipping off loose threads for hours on end.¹ This highly formalised division of labour in a supply chain characterises many systems of modern industrial production, but the phenomenon in textile fabrication originates from the separation of the thread spinning from cloth weaving. According to Marx and Engels, the development of a nation's productive forces manifests most vividly by the degrees of division of labour.² Engels writes on this history in *The Condition of the Working Class in England*; before the introduction of machinery, the spinning and weaving of raw materials were carried on in working homes, with the wife and daughter typically spinning the yarn which would then be woven by the husband before being sold. This allowed for the weaver to "lay by something, and rent a little piece of land, that he cultivated in his leisure hours, of which he had as many as he chose to take, since he could weave whenever and as long as he pleased."³ Here, Engels describes the pre-industrial peasantry class as largely self-sufficient, owning a small piece of land to cultivate alongside their textile work. This changed with the invention of the "Spinning Jenny" in 1764, a multi-spindle spinning frame that became a key development in textile manufacturing, and the catalyst for the industrial revolution. This dramatically upscaled the production of yarn, with workers being able to spin 8 spools simultaneously instead of 1. Weavers now had to employ other workers to process the available amounts of yarn and meet the increasing demand for exportation. As Engels explains, the class of farming weavers soon entirely disappeared, and was merged into the new class of weavers who lived wholly upon wages and who owned no property: proletarians. "Moreover, the old relation between spinner and weaver was destroyed."⁴

The left-hand side bell sleeve takes a while to undo, starting at the side seam that disappears into the bodice without a clear beginning or end, and making my way to the top of the sleeve where the fabric is stitched onto a thin elastic band, creating a ruffle. As I pull off the elastic band with force, it leaves a pattern of perfectly sharp folds in the fabric where the gatherings used to be. The sleeve folds out into

"Cut Make Trim"



The Spinning Jenny

- 1 Hoskins, Tansy E. *Stitched Up: The Anti-Capitalist Book of Fashion (Counterfire)*. Pluto Press. Kindle Edition.
- 2 Marx, Karl and Friedrich Engels. *The German Ideology Part One, with Selections from Parts Two and Three, together with Marx's "Introduction to a Critique of Political Economy."* New York: International Publishers, 2001.
- 3 Engels, Friedrich. *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. Oxford University Press, New York, 1993.
- 4 Engels, Friedrich. *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. Oxford University Press, New York, 1993.

what looks like a regular short-sleeve pattern, widened and heightened at the top, forming an aggregated curve. The large, gathered sleeve is characteristic for the milkmaid-style garment, and here in conjunction with a slender bodice, it's making a conspicuous reference to a garment originally worn by maids working on a dairy farm. The gathered sleeve, now usually accomplished with elastic, used to be created through an embroidery technique called smocking. This embroidery style, where small gatherings are fastened by hand in the shape of triangles, was designed to give shape to the oversized cotton garments, gathering the fabric at the neckline, bodice, and sleeves. This technique allowed for elasticity so the fabric could stretch, creating an airy, flexible, yet fitted piece, perfect for agricultural labour.

Smocking originates from medieval England but has been a largely forgotten embroidery technique due to its utilitarian rather than decorative nature. Other more ornamental embroidery styles have been preserved well, as the wearers of these garments were usually upper class civilians. Smocking, however, was a style of embroidery only worn by peasants and therefore less known, which is where its name originates from, *smock*; a farmer's work shirt. In reference to this *smock* sleeve, my milkmaid top utilized instead of an elastic band, stitched onto the full length of the sleeve pattern whilst stretched out. The less stretchy fabric ruffles under the tension of the elastic, creating a gathering similar to smocked embroidery, but much more instantaneous and cost-effective.

Although produced under contemporary mass-industrial circumstances, the stylistic features of my garment hints at a time before the industrial revolution. In a way, it exists in the current fashion context as an anachronism, alluding to a simpler past where rural peasants lived cheerfully under the reign of their feudal lords, rendering the hardships endured by agricultural laborers invisible. Standing in stark contrast with its mode of production, the milkmaid top channels the figure of the ultimate industrious good girl; the dairymaid or female farmhand. In her book *Dairy Queens, the Politics of Pastoral Architecture*, Meredith Martin elaborates upon how it was commonplace for the French nobility to have a mock dairy built on the premises of one's property. Within the walls of these follies, women of the noble elite played out their rural fantasies; sometimes as a means to escape the complexities of life in court, sometimes to conspire against the patriarchal systems that suppressed them. In a similar tendency that can be observed in contemporary fashion, these women started to acquire a taste for the (re)productive and rural sensibilities associated with milkmaids and shepherdesses. For example, the 17th Century Duchesse de Montpensier created her own rural retreat as a means to escape the reign of Louis XIV. In a letter to her friends, she wrote; "I would like us to keep herds of sheep in these beautiful meadows, to have a shepherd's staff and wide brimmed hats, to sit down in the green grass and to dine on rustic fare like that of shepherds, and sometimes to imitate what we have read in *L'Astree*⁵ though without any amorous pursuit, for that does not please me in any guise. When we are wear-



Louis de Carmentelle,
The Farm Girls, Madame de la Houze and Mademoiselle de Longueil, ca. 1782.
Photo Reunion des Musees Nationaux / Art Resource.

5 Honore d'Urfe *L'Astree*, an influential pastoral novel written by a rural nobleman and published between 1607 and 1627 as cited in Martin, Meredith. *Dairy Queens, the politics of pastoral architecture from Catherine de' Medici to Marie-Antoinette*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge Massachusetts and London, England. 2011

ing shepherd's clothing, I would not disapprove of those who milk the cows nor of those who make the cheese and cakes, since we must eat, and I do not propose that the project for our life should be as far fetched as those novels where they observe a perpetual fast and rigorous abstinence is practiced."⁶

This escapist aspiration can similarly be found in the intentions of the founders of the label responsible for the creation of my garment. *I Saw it First* was started in 2017 by Boohoo group co-founder Jalal Kamani, who also runs other fast fashion chains such as Nasty Gal and Pretty Little Things with his business partner and son, Umar Kamani. In an interview with co-founder and CEO Umar Kamani, he states; "The world is beset by so many problems and, in the midst of it all, we are trying to create a fairy tale for women."⁷

After having disassembled the sleeves, I arrived at the bodice. Without the breast cups, what remains is just a rectangular piece of fabric with two oval-shaped holes cut out of the front panel. As I'm snipping through the layers of lock thread I come across the label of the garment. On a plastic-coated piece of white fabric it states in black letters: *95% polyester, 5% elasthan, wash at 40 degrees, wash with similar colours, do not bleach, do not tumble dry, do not dry clean, keep away from fire, and finally: made in the UK.*

My garment speaks to a new retail manufacturing trend: *reshoring*.⁸ Reshoring is the process of returning (part of) the production of goods back to the brand's home country. For labels like *I Saw It First*, domestic production means the ability to produce even quicker, resulting in the self-coined "fastest fashion" regime that characterises the online retailer. Instead of several collections a year, *I Saw it First* releases various new styles each day. In the words of Carol Kane, joint chief executive of the Boohoo Group: "We are a fast fashion business with a focus on speed to market, so being able to manufacture our products in the UK allows us to lead the way in offering the very latest trends and styles."⁹ The fact that some aspects of production are brought back to the UK doesn't mean however that all materials are sourced there. When a label indicates a country of origin, this is technically speaking information the brand voluntarily provided. Whereas food products are legally obliged to state their exact geographical derivation, in UK and EU legislation, clothing producers are still free to leave this opaque. This plays into the hands of producers who are looking to cut costs by offshoring their manufacturing, culminating in the increasing fragmentation of apparel production supply chains, a direct result of neo-liberal policy-making and free trade ideology. Local production and scrutiny were formerly protected by the Multi Fibre Arrangement (MFA) through the governing of the world trade in textiles, specifically regulating global supply and exchange. In her book *Making Sweatshops*, Ellen Rosen explains how the ending of this arrangement in 1994 and its replacement by the World Trade Agreement (WTA) created a paradigm shift in global production, as it permitted continuous opportunities for opening textile and apparel markets throughout



19th Century Farmers Smock,
© Abergavenny Museum 2021

6 *ibid*

7 fashionnetwork.com

8 On the subject of reshoring and the resurgence of the UK sweatshop see the podcast of "Politics Theory Other" with Dr Ashok Kumar

9 draperonline.com

the world, namely allowing newly industrializing countries in Asia to compete with the Western Hemisphere due to low-wage garment production.¹⁰ New trade accords and eliminations of quotas continue to enable the fashion industry to globally splinter its supply chain through subcontracting, resulting in a production process so complex even its own instigators will be largely unaware of the conditions of production. This leaves a large grey area full of opportunities for the obfuscation of illegal working and environmental conditions. In reality, the fact that the label of my garment states "Made in the UK" says very little about its journey through this world. It might have been stitched in the UK but this leaves many questions about other aspects of its production process, such as where the raw polyester fibre comes from, where this has been spun, woven, and dyed, where the overlocker threads were made, and the label printed. These are all links in the chain that brands are not required to disclose on the labels in our garments, the only point of access to information about what we wear, leaving consumers in the dark about the working conditions and resource extractions necessary to create their clothes.

Encountering a used garment is a multi-sensory experience. When steam-ironing the armpits of a cotton shirt or the crotch of synthetic trousers, no matter how many times it's been washed some remains of the smell of its wearer escape in the steam, filling the air with the mystery of an authorless memory. When extracting the last thread from the fabric of the neckline of my garment, I find some beige smudges of foundation. The smell of washing detergent has erased most traces of human smell, but if I press my nose deep enough between its fibres there is a vague hint of cooking aroma, leaving me to speculate on the habits of its previous owner. Yet, commodities also transcend sensuousness, as Marx describes, living both as something mysterious, a fetish, as well as something tangible and physical.¹¹ A second-hand garment, in the first stage of the process of post-consumer expulsion, speaks most obviously of the process of valuation and devaluation that will eventually render it obsolete. Neither discarded nor new, they have the ability to propel us toward answers on the concrete history of their circulation. Or, in the words of Arjan Appadurai: "For that we have to follow the things themselves, for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories. It is only through the analysis of these trajectories that we can interpret the human transactions and calculations that enliven things."¹²



Interior of early nineteenth-century Bethnal Green weavers' workhomes, 1894, © Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archive



PSF Production Equipment for Producing Polyester Fibers. Image Courtesy of Changzhou Mosun Ultrasonic Equipment Co., Ltd.

10 Ellen Rosen. *Making Sweatshops: The Globalization of the U.S. Apparel Industry* (Kindle Locations 242-244). Kindle Edition.

11 Shell, Hanna Rose. *Shoddy, From Devil's Dust to the Renaissance of Rags*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 2020 quoting Marx

12 Arjan Appadurai, ed. *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984.

Katsumi Watanabe, *Gangs of Kabukicho*, February 1, 2009. Published by PPP Editions/Andrew Roth Inc., New York; 1st edition



Yohji Yamamoto, Ready-to-Wear, Runway Collection, Men Spring / Summer 2000. © firstVIEW 2021