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Race You! Poiret to Chalayan – paper

It has been argued that we live in a 'post ideological' age in which the confrontation between different artistic and political positions is less radical than in the past.

Are contemporary artists less constrained by artistic and political ideologies or has the debate taken a new and less obvious form?

Post-ideological theory implies that we live in an age without dreamers, that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than an alternate way of thinking. Theorist Slavoj Žižek claims that we understand the ruling systems of belief and choose not to change them. (Slavoj Žižek (ed.), 'The Spectre of Ideology', *Mapping Ideology*, London; New York: Verso, 1994, pp.1-33)

However, while this may be a popular belief among some theorists, our society is not without its dreamers. Just as radical thinkers triumphed in the past, they continue to do so today, continually extending the limitations of established doctrines.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, fashion designer Paul Poiret appropriated motifs and features from the Orient and Eastern-Europe to create a modern and unconstrained fashion silhouette. His designs were loose, fashioned to fit the uncorsetted body. This body, clad in veils, loose pants and turban was now marked as free and erotic, as Western sensibility manifested a highly eroticised image of the Oriental and Eastern-European worlds, regardless of their actual cultural beliefs.

The domination of West continues in the twenty-first century, however, issues of racial otherness are approached in alternate ways. While nationality has could be seen to be becoming increasingly irrelevant in a dynamic global fashion market, new arguments centring on race are placed in the active cultural exchange of ideas continuously. Japanese designers now represent themselves and the English designer, Hussein Chalayan explores themes within his own Turkish-Cypriot background through conceptual yet wearable creations. What do these new interpretations mean for these designers, how do their activities contribute to understandings of cultural ideologies and for representations of their cultures within the field of fashion?

By examining representations and contributions of Oriental and Eastern-European racial groups, this paper will trace the changes that have occurred within the representation of

race, from an early conception, used to reinscribe the body and express exoticism, to the present, where designers of mixed nationalities contribute their own bodies of work.

Paola Di Trocchio is currently assistant curator for International Fashion and Textiles at the National Gallery of Victoria. She has also worked concurrently in the Relocation department, packing and transporting the Fashion and Textiles to be moved to the newly renovated gallery on St. Kilda Road. In July she presented a paper at the 'Making an Appearance' conference in Brisbane, Queensland entitled, 'Baz Luhrmann's Red Curtain Costumes'. Previously she has had experience as a costume designer for the JYM theatre company.
