

Revolution and Your Wardrobe

Fashion and Politics in the Photography of Jane Stravs

W. J. T. Mitchell

Precisely in such periods of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle cries, and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history. . . . Thus Luther donned the mask of the Apostle Paul, the Revolution of 1789 to 1814 draped itself alternately as the Roman republic and the Roman empire.

Karl Marx, The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte (1852)

Political revolution has always been at least partly a matter of fashion. From the sans-culottes of the 1790s to the bellbottoms of the sixties, from the roundhead coiffures of the English Revolution to the shaggy locks and peasant garb of counter-culture Third Worldism, men and women have expressed the spirit of historical change in models of fashion. Conversely, fashion itself regularly represents its changes as revolutionary breakthroughs, liberations, experiments in transgressive, scandalous forms of life that break with the dead hand of the past.

Right alongside these interchanges between fashion and politics is a deep hatred of fashion, an iconoclastic desire for a revolution that will strip away the masks, the costumes, and images to reveal the naked body of the authentic revolutionary, the bare landscape of the utopian society to come. Michelet's history of the French Revolution begins with a paean to the blank emptiness of the Champ de Mars: the only appropriate emblem to the revolution, says Michelet, is "empty space," the landscape cleared of all symbols as (paradoxically) a symbol of the break with the past. Marx, similarly, argues that the nineteenth century revolution "cannot begin with itself until it has stripped of all superstition in regard to the past." Delacroix's bare-breasted Liberty Leading the People is an icon of the naked revolutionary, the abject heroine whose vulnerability is also her armor, a spectacle of beautiful abandon designed to paralyze the enemy as surely as the horrid sight of Medusa.

To fashion and politics we must add a third term, the notion of art, which traditionally has situated itself in an autonomous space beyond the claims of both. Art, we are told, is not a mere matter of fashion, of ephemeral cycles and fads. Artistic change is supposed to be a matter of *style*, not fashion, of deep, historic changes, not superficial marketing trends. Art, in other words, is supposed to be like the authentic, naked revolution, producing a fundamental change in human life, not just the seasonal onset of modish costumes, hair styles, and automotive design. (The concept of "style" is often mobilized in contrast to fashion, to suggest a deeper, more meaningful change). At the same time, art is supposed to be independent of politics, or at least engaged with politics at a higher, more disinterested level than mere propaganda.

The question arises, then: what happens when all these distinctions between art, fashion, and politics have been thoroughly undermined? The general answer has been: postmodernism, a

condition in which the difference between art and mass culture, art and fashion, has been erased, and the possibility of revolution, with its grand narratives of emancipation, has been rendered unthinkable. One resource that is left to art in this situation is demystification, a blank irony in which, as Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe puts it, “everything will survive as a critical image of itself.”¹ Another is beauty, that irredeemably frivolous and irresponsible phenomenon that “resists or evades critique”(12), and any other power that “seeks to administer it” (a formulation which suggests that beauty might offer at least an anarchist version of revolutionary potential). These resources seem especially conspicuous in recent art and fashion photography, and in a general tendency of fashion photography to embrace ironic, arty strategies, while “art photography” renounces politics and the classic strategies of “straight” or “documentary” photography to embrace fashion, glamour, and pictorialist traditions of the carefully staged image.

The flows, then, between art, politics, and fashion (which, despite everything, remain distinct at a practical or institutional level—otherwise how could any “flow” take place?) can go in many directions, especially in a medium like photography, which is the all-purpose intersection of these domains. So, for instance, in a recent issue of the New Yorker we find a portfolio by the hybrid art/fashion photographer, Herb Ritts, which includes a black and white photograph that is a direct parody of depression-era documentary. An undernourished looking family is posed in front of a boarded-up shack wearing ragged, dirty clothes, a portrait of stoical endurance that recalls the challenge James Agee threw at viewers of Walker Evans photographs in Let Us Now Praise Famous Men: “Who are you who will read these words and study these photographs, and through what cause, by what chance and for what purpose, and by what right do you qualify to, and what will you do about it?”. The caption, however, informs us that these are models, and that “Hard times on the hardpan” is actually about fashion: “big brother’s boiled sweater with holes” is by Junya Watanabe; Pa’s filthy undershirt is “by Dolce & Gabbana.” (The New Yorker Sept. 9, 2002, p. 128-29). The “you” addressed by these photographs is the cosmopolitan reader of The New Yorker, browsing the fashions, getting the joke, understanding the codes that make photography—even the most serious documentary photography—completely vulnerable to the autonomous play of photographic signs, and the frivolity of the untethered signifier.

The question is, then, what happens to this sort of hybrid photographic style when it encounters a real political moment, and an actually existing revolutionary situation? What happens when the hip, ironic, beauty-obsessed international language of fashion bubbles up out of a real place as an expression of historical forces, rather than an appropriation of them as grist for the global market in images? An answer is provided by the work of Jane Stravs, a Slovenian art/fashion photographer whose work has been seen as integral to the revolution which made Slovenia an independent republic, breaking away from Yugoslavia in the early 90s. Marina Grzinic argues that Stravs’ photographs, which bear all the marks of contemporary fashion, “contain a story about our civilization—which is not a mere cynical factual gesture—something that frightens and confuses us.” In Stravs’ “perfectly modelled models,” Grzinic finds what is usual in fashion—“a certain carelessness, slyness, recklessness, immorality, emptiness.” In their beauty she sees a “frivolity” that seems quite incompatible with any “social responsibility,” much less *socialist* responsibility. And that irresponsibility is exactly what makes Stravs’ images, in the context of

¹Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime (New York: Allworth Press, 1999). I am heavily indebted to this marvelous book for much of the insight that follows.

the glum, puritanical atmosphere of socialist responsibility, doubly transgressive in their irony and beauty. The model as “feminised man so foreign to socialist imagery and also understood as the frightening phantasmal negative image of the positive socialist pater familias” becomes, if not a revolutionary model, at least something disturbing to both the conventions of “serious” political revolutions, and “frivolous” fashion photography.

In order to see this, however, we need to descend from generic categories to specific pictures, asking ourselves, not what they “mean” or “do” in some straightforwardly rhetorical way, but what they *want*. How do Stravs’ photographs address us? How does their “home address,” in the sense of their site of origination in space and time, affect the way we address them? In short, where are they coming from? What appeal do they make to the beholder? What desire lurks in their blank spaces and contradictions, especially in their conjoining of irony and beauty, Slovenian provenance and international manners?

Perhaps the most obvious contradiction in Stravs’ compositions is the peculiar relation between figure and ground they establish. Most of his pictures are of single figures, sometimes posed frontally for portraits, more often staged as if they were engaged in some ordinary activity—walking, playing some frivolous game, or just waiting. The point is that these are absolutely non-narrative actions. We do not observe the models doing anything that we could tell a story about. They are not at that pregnant moment of ethical decision that was so important to classical painting. No one is leaping over a barricade, though they may be pretending to climb a fence or kick an old tire. They are at that pause before the story has begun, or after it is over. The backgrounds of the photographs are entirely compatible with this anti-narrative tactic. The models are generally posed in rather abstract settings, the bleak landscapes of (presumably) the Karst, “a barren limestone plateau broken by depressions and ridges,” or in ruined industrial landscapes.² At the level of narrative temporality, then, the models seem to fit perfectly in their spaces, an effect that is accentuated when their costumes seem to turn them into robots or cyborgs that merge with the machinery in industrial interiors (see *Moderna Galeria*, 14, 15). These are places where human activity looks unlikely. The industrial spaces have fallen into disuse; the Karst looks like a place so hostile and sterile that nothing could live there. The models are just biding their time, hanging around, doing what models do—posing for the camera.

At the level of spatial composition, however, the effect is quite the opposite, and the models are like fish out of water. Their beauty, glamour, and stylishness contrasts sharply with the hostile, threatening backgrounds. Look, for instance, at Sara, fashion Stella Rubens, Algrie, 1990. The glamorous model in a gray tailored suit—a “power suit” except for the short pants is surrounded by a crowd of unruly Arab boys at a refugee camp. (This reminded me at first of a Benneton ad, showing the “United Colors” taking American fashion to the multicultural world). It gives off mixed signals—the excited crowd of boys, obviously aware of and acting out for the camera, the model pretending to be unaware of the camera, expression cool and controlled, classic cross-legged stance. The clowning boys contrast sharply with the monumentality of the model, who

²The strategy of posing models in bleak, desert settings to highlight their beauty by contrasting it to the background is not, of course, original with Stravs, but is a commonplace of fashion photography. See the work of Bert Stern, for instance. I’m grateful to Joel Snyder for this piece of information.

looks to be six feet tall in this picture. And the punktum? It is, quite literally, a tear in the model's suit. Her left shoulder is bare, as if the sleeve had been torn away by the boys tugging at it. Or is it, as we say, a fashion cut?³

The models (excepting notably the robot-cyborgs) are quite literally, "out of place," displaced figures of sensuous, slightly obscene enjoyment inserted into spaces of unpleasure, sensory deprivation, danger. In some cases, this disconnection between the figure and the ground is highlighted by composition as well as imagistic content. In *Ranko II*, 1985, for instance, the male model, in fashionable black suit and white t shirt, smokes and saunters in the foreground, with an industrial structure behind him—catwalks, corrugated sheet metal, ladders, and smokestacks. But the model is not just in figure/ground, foreground/background relation to this space: he is also "adjacent" to it, as it were, framed in his own whited-out space so that one's first impression is that he could have been inserted into the print with a double exposure or photomontage technique. This is a pervasive strategy in Stravs' pictures: the appearance that the model is not really in the space, not of the space, but somehow inserted or projected into it, brought to it from elsewhere--which is, of course, the plain fact about the creation of these photographs. In this sense, they are quite honest about the artificiality of the composition, and deliberately renounce any strategies of naturalization, while enhancing the unnaturalness of their actuality.

It would be tempting, of course, to allegorize this pictorial strategy as a symbol of the Slovenian revolution, the insertion of the new, transgressive, emergent generation, including the coming out of the gay community, punk youth subcultures, the flowering of capitalist decadence, dandyism, and fashion itself in the empty wasteland of the old sterile, revolutionary regime, signified by the deserted, ruined landscapes. Is this *McWorld vs Jihad*? Is this a story of capitalist beauty, frivolity, and fashion invading the sublime, serious landscape of socialism? It's a temptation, however, that has to be resisted if we are to take a fuller measure of these photographs and the uneasiness they provoke.

To see this, we need to consider more closely the posing of the models, their relation to the clothing that they model and the beholders they address. Stravs' general strategy is to give his models something to do that will prevent their looking at the camera. They often seem self-absorbed, distracted, looking offstage, or (as I've said) just waiting for something. They do not (with some exceptions) address the beholder. And yet everything about them makes it clear that they are there for nothing else but the camera and the beholder. They have nothing to do with these places, but are only in them to pose for the photographer and for us. They are (to evoke Michael Fried's categories) theatrically flaunting their anti-theatricality. In *Cliche, s/s 1998* (Slide 1), the woman trying to climb the chain link fence in her spike heels and mini-dress is clearly not engaged in the action of climbing the fence, but in a posed gesture that simulates the act. In *Cliche s/s 1999* (Slide 20) the model looks as if she has just fallen headlong down the stairs, but she also looks as if she had simply laid down on the stairs to simulate the situation.

When Stravs allows the model to look directly at the camera, on the other hand, he cultivates a

³I draw the concept of the punktum (the wound, puncture) from Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981).

look which rarely ingratiates the beholder. Part of this is, of course, simply the obligatory “cool” that goes with modelling. These models seem not only sure of themselves, but even to be challenging the viewer to do something for them. The cross-dressers Sicoe and Salome (Moderna Galeria 24, 25) stare rather aggressively at the camera while the feminine Ana-Marija and Lara manage to flaunt their beauty without the “come hither” look or the knowing coyness of pornography. Even the frankly sexy poses of Valerija and Daniela (26 & 27) show them as if they were merely tolerating the camera, an effect which is enhanced by the lighting, which dapples them with bars and bands of sunlight, letting them retreat into the shadows at the same time it picks out certain features (eyes, half a face) while obscuring others. In the striking Balogh Fashion I, 1989, a color print, the model seems transfixed by the shaft of light that bisects her body as she walks down a narrow city street. It’s as if she has fallen into a luminous tractor beam that has pulled her off balance, leaving her dazzled and ready to stagger into the brick wall on her right. Like the model falling down stairs or climbing the fence, we see her being stricken by enlightenment in a moment of confusion that must have taken quite some time to set up.

But the most common gesture in Stravs’ compositions is the withdrawal of the model from the viewer, as if he wanted to catch them walking off the job. Could this be fashion’s answer to the general strike, the models refusing to pose, pausing to repose, to rest, withdraw, escape? “Model” is both a noun and a verb, a person and a practice, a body and an activity. What are these models modelling? What Imago, what “model for imitation” are they selling? Stravs’ models manage to convey the impression that they are not doing their job, while doing it very well. What, then, is the job they are doing and not doing at the same time? What they are not doing is anything that could be construed as acting, taking on obvious political or ethical agency. They are, rather, figures of passivity, reacting or reposing, wandering off, resting, waiting. Milton thought that waiting was a form of revolutionary activity: “they also serve who only stand and wait.” But Milton was a very serious man, a Puritan revolutionary who believed (like the modern art world) in all black clothing.

Stravs is of two minds about black. In what is regarded as his most famous and “iconic” composition, Ranko I, 1990, the black suit is being shed in a gesture of exuberance, gaiety, and jouissance. Ranko strides purposefully without purpose, whistling and disrobing, his body seeming less inclined to walk somewhere than to levitate itself. The formal perfection and iconic clarity of this picture resides, not only in its echoes of Cartier-Bresson, but in emblematic archetypes like the figure of The Fool in the Tarot pack, relative of the harlequin, the dandy, and the joker. Could this be the model of/as a postmodern frivolous revolutionary? We know that The Fool is always poised at the edge of a cliff, his eyes fixed on the sky. If Ranko is a role model, he is a highly equivocal one.

A more Miltonic note is struck by the withdrawing cloaked man on the cover of Moderna Galerija. Here, in contrast to Ranko 1, the model has almost disappeared into what he is modelling. The huge cloak, with its massive shoulders, is like the folded black wings of some bird of prey or scavenger. The model’s head almost merges with the collar, so that the figure can be read as totally hooded. And then we notice the bare feet, naked, vulnerable on the harsh limestone pebbles, the Slovenian badlands looming in the background. He could be a saint on a pilgrimage, a holy man in the wilderness, waiting for visions and voices to come out of emptiness, a desert version of Friedrich’s Monk by the Sea, absorbed in the infinite wasteland.

Of course the image is thoroughly self-contradictory in its connotations, simultaneously suggesting armor and vulnerability, excessive clothing and nakedness in exactly the wrong place for this environment; fashion, beauty, glamour, and death, sterility, catastrophe. What if Death passed by on bare feet?

I don't really care if Jane Stravs "knows" all this or intended it. The important thing is that this is what the pictures intended, what they wanted. Fashion images, like every other, have lives of their own. Revolutions always have their fashions in the form of wardrobes, models, poetic images, cliches, received ideas. Some are affirmed, re-cited, put on; others are stripped away to reveal a new nakedness, some are resurrected from another place and time to adorn a new historical location. And fashion, for its part, must seek out revolutions where it can find them. Stravs' images are citings as much as they are sightings. They veer between the serious and the frivolous, and they manage to send up both, ironizing both the dark and the light side of revolution, while releasing an uncontrollable beauty. The question they pose, then, is not what is to be done, but what is to be worn.⁴

⁴I am grateful to Joel Snyder for providing me with the concluding sentence of this essay.