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MODA

# PARADISE Lost

From *STYLE WARS* to *WAR STYLES*  
By MAHRET KUPKA

The inspiration for this text came from a photograph emailed to me by a friend some time ago, together with a question: “Since when do IS fighters dress in fashion by Rick Owens?”—A few weeks later, an article appeared in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung* entitled “The New Black: On the Fashion of Darkness.” In the article, Mareike Nieberding references the question posed by the Tunisian Bader Lanour, from his blog *SLF*, the “Magazine for Modern Salafists”: “Why do the infidels try to look like us?” According to the author, the article, which, like the blog itself, is no longer online, showed “images of George Clooney and other stars with full beards, along with photos of the fashion weeks in Paris: men in harem pants down to the ankles, with oversized T-shirts tumbling down with almost as much volume as a tunic, worn with sandals or white sneakers.” She concludes: “The new black came to the mainstream of jihad and the shopping centres of the world at the same time ... Black of hooded sweaters printed with white lettering are worn ... not only by Islamists but also by high school students in Berlin-Zehlendorf.” At the time, the style was known as “Street Goth” and was propagated by rappers such as A\$AP Rocky or Kanye West, among others. A few years later, and now with a pronounced sporting component, the style spread on the internet and was known as “Health Goth,” perhaps the more clearly to set itself apart from political implications: physical fitness through sports rather than through armed battle pitting one person against another. In her text, Nieberding does not find an answer to the question of who is influenced by whom: whether it is the fashion labels that draw their inspiration from propagandistic YouTube clips, or whether it is instead the jihadis, secretly ogling such trappings of Western lifestyle as Nike sneakers and hoodies. There is no clear direction discernible. “Fashions are global,” she writes.

“Since when do IS fighters dress in fashion by RICK OWENS?”

fashion as “forms of a precarious willingness to drop everything.” These forms are more diverse than ever before, yet their essence lies in a “climate of mistrust” that, although perhaps directed against the ever-accelerating cycles of the fashion system in particular, more generally reflects a yearning for the kind of order and clarity that are worth fighting for. In the 1980s, Japanese fashion designers introduced a “fashion after fashion” to the scene, dropping a nuclear bomb into the dazzling, colorful Western world of fashion that left behind little more than representatives of Hiroshima chic clad in black rags. Fashion became more colorful and playful again in the years that followed, but it could no longer free itself from the stigma of doom of a “fashion at the edge,” highly politicized as in the designs by Alexander McQueen, who, in works such as his *Highland Rape* collection for fall/winter 1995/96, highlighted not only his own Scottish ancestry but also and above all the exploitation of Scotland by England.

Arguably, then, the black that Nieberding describes in the *FAS* is not “new.” In its simplicity, it saves Yohji Yamamoto, by his own account, from distraction; it afforded Coco Chanel the opportunity to focus on the essential, be it a specific cut or a message to be conveyed clearly. “In a time in which everything is always becoming shriller, more colorful, louder, more pink, black is also a provocation,” it is written in the *FAS*. And that is universal and timeless. The article also says that the IS fighters opted for black “because in the eighth century, the armies of the Abbasid Caliphate had conquered an entire empire dressed in black.”

The aesthetically new has its roots in the global village of the internet.

In the current fashion issue of *Texte zur Kunst*, Ingeborg Harms describes today’s



AMMO ANGLAIS

Inspired by embroidery from the Balkans or traditional nomad clothing, Sadak’s outfits are combined with military camouflage — and provocatively confront current events: AW 2016/2017 Collection *Borders* by Sadak.

We are at **WAR**, particularly with ourselves. And *the fabric on our skin* serves as the multifunctional **ARMOR**.

The Western urban fighters of today take their lead from the color codes of the domestic military, combined with elements drawn from sports. Everything utterly functional: the simple, skin-tight yoga pants made of breathable materials, perfect for the studio and the everyday office life that follows. Simply throw on a bomber jacket and you’re ready to go. Those who wish to can combine this with a model from the Nike Air Max *Camo* line in the spotted camouflage pattern of the army of wearer’s favorite nation. The clothing that, just a few years ago, mothers viewed with great suspicion and considered oversexualized everyday style when worn by their young daughters, are now being worn by the mothers themselves. The ideally lean and muscular leg, perfectly staged through skin-tight, elastic fabric, carries the well-toned upper body, which is subtly accentuated by ruffled fabric of the bomber jacket. The look is a sexual proposal and a declaration of war at the same time: “Look. But don’t even think about it.” Body challenges waged on social networks have long since ceased to be about the thinnest body and are now about the perfect measure of muscle mass. The limbs are no longer simply lean but well-formed; the city-dweller is fit and agile as she scampers, undetected, through the night streets in a black track suit.

The “precarious willingness” of which Harms speaks is not necessarily monetary in nature and instead references, first and foremost, a dearth of meaning and values. The hero is a lone warrior on the yoga mat, or in the Ironman competition. “His mental constitution,” Harms points out, “is not all too far removed from the ideas of the youth of Western metropolises as they head off to jihad.” While some steel themselves for a martyr’s death and entry into paradise, others—who already live in paradise—steel their bodies for their own personal War. There is no need to answer the question of who’s influenced by whom, because the respective manifestations of style root in a similar basis. They are signs of a battle fought out by warriors operating in the shadows, not in the parliaments of the states or in the boardrooms of multinational corporations. In these shadows, they encounter fear, violence, and wrath that not rarely manifest themselves in cruel terror, a violence that briefly shoots to the surface in the form of attacks, but that also crops up constantly in everyday life in the makeover of the self.

In his 2011 book, *Topologie der Gewalt* [Topology of Violence], philosopher Byung-Chul Han analyzed the fact that, in contrast to archaic cultures, violence in the modern is not staged in public. Lacking ritualized venues, violence in the modern world has no

language or symbolism of its own. Rather than vanish, it relocates inward, occurring “in a psychized, psychologized, internalized form. ... Destructive energies are not directly, affectively discharged but rather mentally *worked up*,” often with the aid of a therapist. This may explain why the terror we prefer to characterize as Islamist—hence different and not belonging to us—seems so alien to us. The jihadi strikes us as precipitous, archaically intemperate, a case for a psychoanalyst. The “civilized” person takes responsibility for his or her emotions. He or she experiences violence through inner psychological conflicts that either lead to burnout and depression or are defused through socially acceptable coping and relaxation strategies. But what difference does it actually make? In September 2014, in an controversial article published in *The New York Times* philosopher Slavoj Žižek described IS as a “Disgrace to True Fundamentalism.” According to Žižek, true fundamentalism is based on an absence of envy and resentment. It is also characterized by a resolute indifference vis-à-vis the life of the nonbeliever. For Žižek, there is an inherent contradiction in the belief by fundamentalist religious groups such as IS, on the one hand, that they are in possession of ultimate truth, and the need, on the other hand, to wage a violent defence of this belief against nonbelievers. He sees the reason for violence in envy. Essentially, the terrorist deeply covets the very thing he rejects: “One can feel that, in fighting the sinful other, they are fighting their own temptation.” So the battle is directed not against the others but against himself—more precisely, against the inner longing to indulge in that which is perceived as sinful. The problem grows exponentially through the fact that fundamentalist groups such as IS do not feel superior to Western culture and indeed actually have a deep inner sense of inferiority. The problem, Žižek continues, lies not in cultural difference, which essentially scarcely still exists at all. Rather, and paradoxically, the problem lies in the fact that groups such as IS are already shaped by the West; they have already internalized all of the Western standards and measure their lives against them. What is indeed problematic is the lack of a sense of one’s own superiority within these groups. Žižek provides a radical psychoanalysis of IS providing space for reflection: *Us vs Them? But who are they actually? And who am I?*

There is a tragedy inherent in the violent rejection of the self in the other, just as there is in the rejection of the other in the self. Fashion these days is finding its way to a disturbing yet reconciling linkage. We are at war, particularly with ourselves. And the fabric on our skin serves as the multifunctional armor.

