

Three experts look into the fashion of the future

## Material Worlds

As we enter the 90s, the clothes that we wear indicate a change of direction - white, the colour of simplicity, replaces funereal black; crystal, the stone of healing, replaces gold, the colour of money. Fashion has begun to express the dominant concerns of the new decade. The 1990s will be an era when high technology will meet specialist crafts, where pragmatism will meet optimism. In conversation with journalist Charlotte du Cann, designers Georgina Godley and Paul Smith assess the impact of the last decade upon the next.

The 80s are often characterised as the decade of fashion and design. Have people become more familiar with, and articulate in, the language of fashion?

**Paul** In the 60s we saw a slow-down of couture and the start of ready-to-wear, then the 70s was ready-to-wear but not really available to the masses. In the 80s it all became a bit more available, designer fashion on the high street. But in Britain we have just done what we always do with everything, which is to overdose on it.

**Georgina** There has been so much criticism about this overdose in style in the 80s but I think it has been very constructive. At the beginning of the 80s dressing was so tribal. You couldn't go to a nightclub on a certain night unless you were wearing the right thing or you would be kicked out. Now there is a vast melting pot. It has reawakened a new understanding of individuality.

**Paul** We certainly need that individuality now because one of the big problems, with shops especially, is the fact that when you go to Paris, Milan, New York, Tokyo, London, every Benetton looks the same. And you could go to almost any high-street shop in Britain, take the sign off the front and you wouldn't know what it was. They have all got the little spotlight, the good graphics, the great bag and good window dressing. I am desperate for a glittery Christmas card again. Oh, for a bit of kitsch!

**Is there going to be a reaction against this?**

**Paul** I hope so. There are too many of those huge design groups handing out kit-form packaging - it's good but it's kit-form, it's not individual anymore.

**Georgina** The kind of cliché that is coming out about the 80s is that it's been

all style and no content. But I think fashion has been quite the opposite. On the whole the collections have all had a viable story and a place. But real progress in the product itself has been too easily held back by a disguise of cynical tricks in marketing. Corporate and packaging design comes cheaper than developing a product sensitively.

In the 80s, design in fashion was drawn from many different sources, different cultures. Everyone was grabbing for the next new thing - we were Italian one moment and French the next. Now there seems to be very little left we can borrow from, either in history or in another country.

**Paul** The media has contributed to this. It has helped and harmed us - so much information is available so quickly now that the mystery is taken away immediately. In the 70s you could always tell where Kenzo had been on holiday - he came back with the Red Indian Collection, the Peruvian Collection, the Moroccan Collection. But now we all travel more, and it is all in and out so fast. So much that comes out is never really maximised.

**What stands out as the epitome of the 80s is a style characterised by films like 9½ Weeks - a uniform that meant success, material gain. But that has only been for the last three or four years and I think a lot of what went on at the beginning of the decade has been completely forgotten.**

**Georgina** And that's what is being looked at again now with fresh eyes. At the very beginning of the 80s, fashion was so much about breaking down barriers. It was radical stuff, all the influence of ethnic styles, the mixing of pin-stripes, men in skirts, sarongs, it was about the revolution in male dressing. In

with the Armani crumpled suit, out with stereotypes.

Now people take it so for granted. Marks & Spencer sell pink sweaters for men without even thinking about it. People have just forgotten what society used to be like at the end of the 70s. It was so rigorous and disciplined. It has been a revolution - the best sort because they don't realise that it has happened.

**Paul** I call it nudging. I've nudged them a lot rather than shove them. If you shove them you scare them off but if you nudge them they don't even know.

**What was your biggest nudge?**

**Paul** The use of colour. Letting men know that it's OK to wear bright colours. And it wasn't me that started this. First of all it was the Teddy Boys and then the Mods and then Punks, but especially the Mods.

It's amazing, they were working-class lads living on council estates and they would get a whack over their heads from their dads just for looking in the mirror to see how their hair looked. And suddenly they were thinking about how they dressed and how they looked. I have managed to make ordinary men, not pop stars, realise that it is ok to think about how they look.

For the last few years it has been very hip to look as if you are in work and earning a lot of money. The reaction against the 80s has been that just to have a job is not actually enough.

**Paul** The major growth area in every fashion business has been suits, but the whole industry is undergoing a change at the moment. I have always done well with suits and I am not suffering at all but sales at Next and Marks & Spencer are decreasing massively. Their suit sales are dramatically down.

What I have managed to do is to make Paul Smith suits easier to wear. You can do what you like, it just happens to be called a suit. I think this standard-kit thing which says: 'I've got money, I work in the city' is already changing. It will have been transformed by 1992.



Georgina Godley's lasting style

How does it affect women? What's happening to all that power-dressing?

**Georgina** A weird thing happened with power dressing. We saw a hiccup in women's dressing when Anna Wintour came from New York to English *Vogue*. She brought with her that hard-hitting, high-heeled, mini-skirted look that pranced across the



pages with an aluminium briefcase. Because of her instant dismissal of what she considered a fey English style and her daunting power in business, English fashion took a very uncharacteristic turn. It never really worked and it came and went very quickly, its influence proving quite superficial.

I have been researching into

uniform recently, finding out what women want and like. I am talking about ladies outside London who work in shops or airports; people who can't afford to indulge their moods in fashion. They want to look professional and efficient and that is a Margaret Thatcher look, but it is nothing new and I think it is a mistake to think of it as pow-

er-dressing. It's more to do with the presentation of the self and cleanliness. It is very suburban if you like.

People talk about Thatcher but the cult of Princess Diana has a lot to answer for too. She caused a resurgence in 'girls wanting to be girls', good or bad. After the early-80s, when girls had shrouded themselves in the shapeless black of Japan, came the shock of the body with Azzadine Alaia. He has been described as a power-dresser but I feel he was closer to worshipping the new femininity.

**But it wasn't exactly feminine, it was a very masculine attitude towards femininity. It was very much 'sex-dressing'.**

**Georgina** This is what is so dangerous about fashion, the media work so quickly taking things up, then the department stores are in there; catwalk shows one minute and the next it's out. I am afraid they are giving a very commonplace, very sexist interpretation of fashion. A thoughtful designer breaks down the barriers but then it is picked up by others in another way and it turns out to be just a short skirt and a big shoulder that gets into the language.

Is this going to change during the 90s?

**Georgina** Authenticity is one of the most important things that is coming through. Often in the 80s you would see that, depending on their figure, girls could wear a long skirt, a short skirt, a baggy jacket or a tight jacket - because it was all in black they could be accepted. Now everything goes and the emphasis is much more on individuals understanding themselves, what they want to express, and it being made available to them on the high street.

The fashion business, which in the past has always dictated, has changed. As a journalist you used to go to the collections expecting new stories, now the story is that it can be anything you like. That choice has been the liberation of the 80s.

**Georgina** Now it's much more about clothes working

for you instead of against you. The fashion of the 90s will be a marriage between sportswear and tailoring - softening up and comfort while using a code of styles to express your own self.

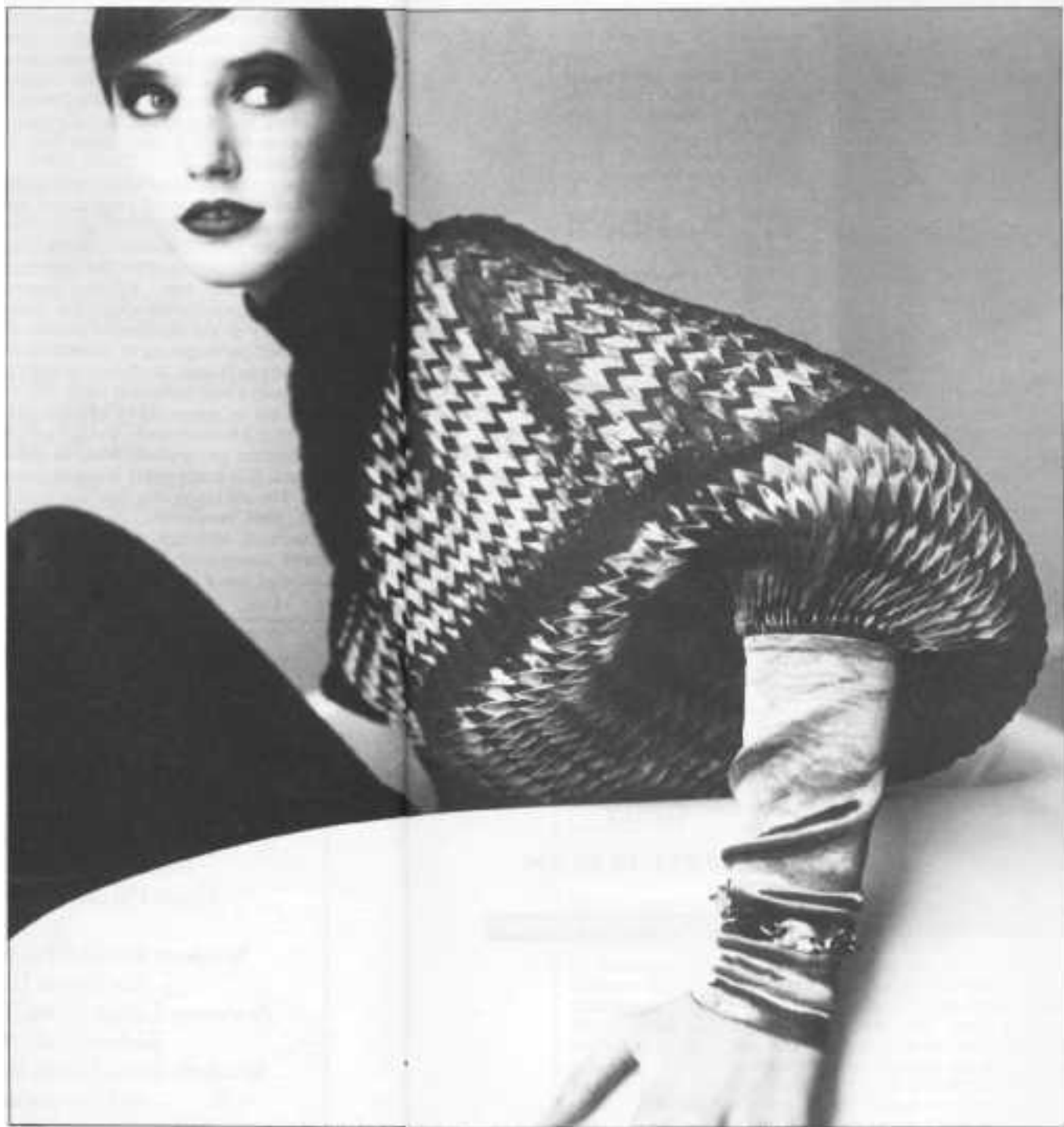
**Paul** Individuality is the key word. Shops like mine that are owned by one person, and there are not many of them, are coming into their own. The so-called recession in Britain seems to be harming the middle bracket. My business has never been better and I think it is because people are searching for that special touch. The problem for people who have got 200 or 400 shops, is that it's difficult to keep the public interested. People come to Paul Smith because the little down-to-earth things are so important.

Your shops are on a much more human scale.

**Paul** In the 80s all the companies have grown, especially because of the big bang and the globalisation of the City. In the 90s, the bigger companies will strive to stay big but break down into divisions and specialise more. Marks & Spencer opened their new shop in Leadenhall in the City two weeks ago. It's the smallest menswear outlet they have ever had and they sold £180,000-worth in a week. They sold 500 suits. And it was jam-packed because suddenly there is this friendly little shop. The staff have tape measures and have been trained to shorten. There's a couch with newspapers and you can order special things from a book that they can get to you in two days.

So even a big store like that has gone back to trying to personalise itself. They are trying to create individualism within the larger units. It is happening with mass-production as well. The Japanese are now pushing mass-production and getting so sophisticated with their robots that they will be able to make shorter runs using mass-production methods.

I have always strived to encourage individuality, to let the wearers of my clothes be themselves. The guy that wears my clothes is not a





'Paul Smith Man', he is himself. Maybe he sits there in a meeting and thinks 'this is nice fabric', or he suddenly notices that it has got a bright green stripe in it. If he wants to show some character he wears flowery socks. I think the 90s will allow people to be themselves more.

**Georgina** What Paul is describing is precisely what is demanded by women now and doesn't exist - it's actually a kind of uniform. An important contribution in women's wear has been made by new technological advances which have allowed me to develop things - none of them are really that new, it is just that they have not been used very much - like lycra mixed with tweeds, rubber-print pleating and new fuse-ables for shape and body. One-piece dressing that is practical, the boilersuit and 'all-in-ones'. Now they're in the language which is brilliant, although it was a struggle to explain them to buyers in the summer 1987 collection.

This is very important to me as a woman because it enables women to be practical and to be attractive, not to feel held back by their femininity. My main concern at the moment is trying to create a uniform for women which is practical and can express their individuality. Men have had this for generations.

**Another thing that is going to win through in the 90s is technological development. Georgina, you work a lot with textile designers and artists using new technology.**

**Georgina** Yes, one of the main problems is the 'big' meeting with something small. I only work on tiny runs. If you want to use the kind of technology that is being employed to churn out 20m shoes per second but you are desperate to introduce a special design feature - forget it.

**Paul** It is very much a British problem. Britain definitely has 'mass-productionitis'. We are obsessed with making things at low prices and we are obsessed with having more and more. It is the killer of creativity in this country. Why do Katharine Hamnett,

Jasper Conran and all the rest have to make in Italy? Because there is nobody here who understands how to back them. Manufacturing had to go over there as well because they couldn't get the small runs that they needed in Britain, nor could they get the quality they wanted.

We keep losing all our talent abroad because factories are only interested in making 20,000 pieces for Marks & Spencer or Next or Burton and it is very difficult. That is something you have always suffered from, Georgina, and me too.

**Georgina** A couple of seasons ago the business went through a bit of a watershed. There was so much competition on the level of product I was working on that I had to get more exclusive and specialise.

**That, I think, will be another trend: when something is bought it will have to have a special value. It is a very English tradition. Perhaps we will go back to that, particularly in women's fashion. Instead of buying 15 frocks a season, buying one and it being very special.**

**Georgina** But then, of course, the chain stores that are doing the basics so brilliantly, like Marks & Spencer, really are able to sell you the best-designed goods. You can rely on them for the back-up and go to the smaller people for the specialist things.

**Paul** Britain has got this peculiar set-up of mass production and low price. If you try to compare us with anywhere else, apart perhaps from America, you just do not find the same set-up. I sell to 70 shops in Italy and they are all owned by Mr and Mrs Somebody. I only sell to 17 in Britain because there aren't any others. Every street has a good middle-of-the-road shop and it demands a middle-of-the-road sort of style.

**Do you think it will change after 1992?**

**Paul** The problem we have got with 1992 is that we are not getting prepared business-wise as a nation. One of the main problems is that, although we have got a good

reputation for training, we immediately lose our new designers to other countries. We have become more of a service industry like fashion design in America and a lot of manufacturing has gone to Italy, to Korea, to Hong Kong and to Japan.

The manufacturing left in this country is dominated by the big chainstores. So we either have these tiny set-ups, or we have huge ones. The people we have got to get to somehow is the manufacturers. We have to let them know they can make money out of design and that they have got to train the sales teams to know how to sell design properly.

**Georgina** Equally frustrating is the fact that, because the British fashion business is fairly small fry and because most designers are forced to run their own businesses, they are too competitive. Rather than sharing contracts they will try to pull the carpet out from under each other. This is so shortsighted and is responsible for the sluggishness in progress in designer manufacturing.

If you go to Italy or Paris, designers speak freely, they share ideas. They go to each other's fashion shows because it is not actually their business. They are not manufacturers, they are respected designers.

**How do you think the green movement is going to affect fashion as far as fabrics or consumption of clothing are concerned?**

**Georgina** The most important thing is that there should be fewer clothes, people should buy less. More use could be made of the technology available in fabric to aid longevity. Fabrics can endure years of wear with the addition of certain synthetics to natural fibres - if you want to go on wearing the clothes. That is the important point, to educate people into buying things that they like, that are about them.

**We won't be looking as if we have just come out of Star Trek?**

**Paul** I don't think so - pointed ears, if anything. The individual will be more im-



**The Paul Smith look**

portant, natural fibres will be more important. A slightly home-made look. All my suits are prick-stitched - you look at eight of them and they all look different. Well move away from everything being perfect and mass-produced.

**That is probably why many people, particularly in the last year, have gone towards ethnic fabric, searching out things that are made by hand.**

**Paul** I love the mix of ethnic and normal. Like the scenes you see in the Yemen if you go there. Masses of Huddersfield worsted is sold to individual tailors there, they buy suiting stripes but they only make jackets in them and they wear them with their Jellaba. So there is this wonderful, mad, odd mix of a city, hand-made jacket worn with maroon, ethnic fabric around the waist and a knife in a scabbard. It's great that kind of oddness. Maybe that's the image for the 90s.