

Fashion Showdown

Alice Rawsthorn finds the world of designer fashion is turning from 80s dreams to 90s doldrums

'Game Over' conjures images of the bright lights and staccato sounds of the end of a computer game, not the glossy world of designer fashion. But this autumn 'Game Over' is splashed across an advertisement for Yohji Yamamoto's menswear collection.

The game may well be over from Yohji and the dozens of other fashion designers who flourished in the 80s. Until then designers had been seen as glorified dress-makers running up frocks for matronly millionairesses with little influence over fashion trends. Styles were set in the worlds of pop and art, in the clubs or on the street, anywhere but on the catwalk.

All that changed in the 80s. Sales of designer fashion soared on the back of a buoyant economy. Chanel was forced to ration sales of its classic quilted bags to no more than three per person. Undeterred, hordes of Japanese tourists hovered outside the Chanel shop in Paris begging passers-by to buy extra bags for them.

The press pored over the exploits of Karl Lagerfeld, Gianni Versace and Calvin Klein with the enthusiasm once reserved for footballers and pop stars. Heavyweight industrialists, like Carlo de Benedetti of Italy and Bernard Arnault of France, raced to invest in fashion. The designers themselves were transformed into media celebrities presiding over billion dollar businesses.

They also assumed greater cultural significance by reclaiming their role as style setters for the first time since the teen cults of the 50s. Azzedine Alaïa's little black dresses and the chunky suits designed by Lagerfeld for Chanel were copied all over the world. The 80s was, after all, the era when everyone, even art students, dressed like merchant bankers.

Now the pendulum has swung back again. Designer fashion is in the doldrums. Last month's *haute couture*

collections in Paris were a wash-out. The fashion totems of today - from track-suits to trainers and baseball caps - owe their origins to the homeboys and homegirls of the Los Angeles ghettos, not to the Paris and Milan catwalks.

At first glance the designers' problems look like a simple response to the combination of economic recession and disillusion with the manic materialism of the 80s. On this analysis, once the economy recovers and people become equally bored by 'anti-fashion', the pendulum should swing back in their favour.

But there is another analysis that suggests the designer backlash is not a short-term phenomenon, but a longer-term response to structural changes in pop culture and the fashion market. If this is so, the fashion designers may never regain the powerful position they occupied in the 80s and could become marginalised again.

One of the main catalysts for the designer boom of the 80s was economic growth. But the impact of the buoyant economy on the designers was intensified by dramatic changes in the demographics of the fashion market. Until the 80s, the chief consumers of designer fashion had been women in their 40s and 50s. This was reflected in work that who tended to eschew avant garde styles in favour of creating classic, luxurious looks for middle-aged customers.

But a type of designer consumer emerged in the 80s: the young careerists, born in the pre-Pill baby boom of the late 50s and early 60s, and now in their 20s. Suddenly, there were enough affluent young people around to provide a profitable market for the fashion designers. They were also more amenable than their predecessors to the concept of designer fashion. Their sartorial taste had been formed as adolescents in the 70s, when pop

culture was dominated by the art school 'glam' of bands like Roxy Music.

Glam was the first real alternative to the hippy hegemony of the 60s. Before glam, being cool almost always meant being scruffy. The glam ethos ensured that the young careerists of the 80s were comfortable with the sartorial luxury traditionally associated with fashion designers. Critically it also created a generation of young men who actually enjoyed dressing up.

A group of new designers surfaced to service these new customers. Older houses, like Christian Dior and Givenchy, still concentrated on classic styling. But it was the young designers - Jean-Paul Gaultier, Romeo Gigli, John Galiano and Rifat Ozbek - with their funky looks, who hogged the headlines.

The catwalk collections seemed younger and more exciting. The fashion designers had regained the role as leaders, rather than followers of fashion, that they had lost in the 50s.

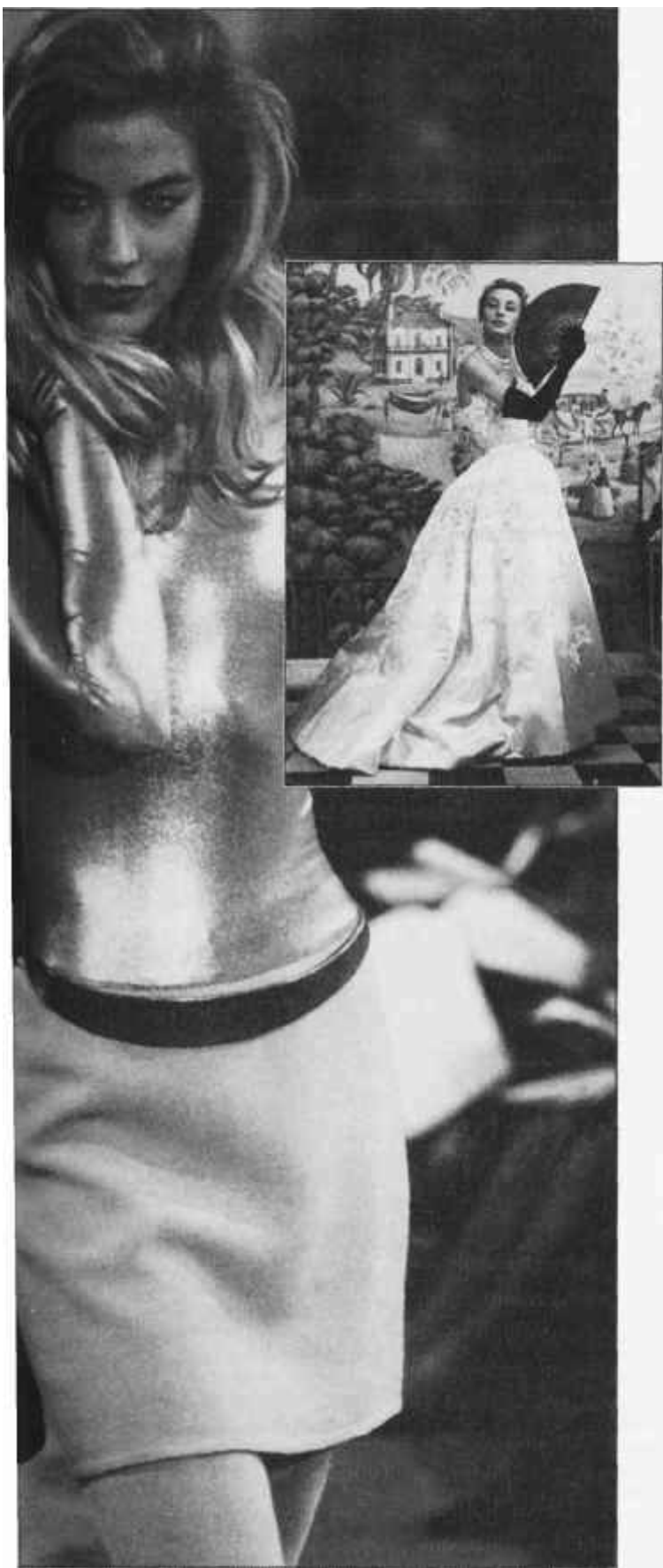
Times have changed. The social and cultural trends that created such an unprecedentedly favourable climate for the designers in the 80s have gone into reverse.

Demographics are different. There are now fewer younger consumers around, thanks to the impact of the Pill on the birthrate from the later 60s onwards. The number of people entering their 20s has been falling since the mid-80s and will continue to fall for the next five years.

At the same time pop culture has moved away from glam towards the ecstasy-tinged egalitarianism of the Madchester and Rimini clubs. The new look is looser and scruffier. It is as strong a reaction against the elitism of the 80s as glam was against the hippy ethos of the 60s.

Stylistically, designers are no longer in the vanguard. They have now been left to copy the styles set in the clubs. Karl Lagerfeld created baseball caps for the models in his Chanel catwalk show more than a year after they first appeared on the streets. American vogue rec-





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ently ran a feature on the 'designer versions' of the chunky neckchains worn by inner-city blacks.

The swing against 80s elitism is reinforced by the changes in the way clothes are made. Most of the innovation in contemporary fashion centres on advances in textile technology - the development of hi-tech fibres like Lycra, or the use of high performance sportswear textiles in leisurewear - rather than on changes in shape or style.

These new fibres and fabrics are manufactured on hi-tech production processes in huge production plants. This is in stark contrast to the exclusivity of the luxurious natural fibres - the fine silks and rare cashmeres associated with 80s designer fashion.

In the longer term there could also be a shift in young consumers' spending habits. Compact discs and portable phones apart, the 80s was a quiet time for consumer innovation. The 90s will be different. The giant Japanese electronics groups have already identified personal technology products - such as the Sony Mini Disc, an audio disc played on a machine the size of a cigarette packet - as a major market of the future. The Mini Disc is the first of a stream of new products which will compete against clothes for young consumers' money.

In short, there will be fewer 20 year-olds around in the 90s, but they will also be less inclined to spend their money on designer clothes than their 80s counterparts. So the designers will eschew the youth market and concentrate on classic collections for their older customers again.

This shift in emphasis will be accentuated by the changes within the fashion industry. Traditionally the fashion houses were small concerns owned and run by the designers themselves. But the industry became institutionalised in the 80s following the emergence of new investors such as de Benedetti and Arnault.

These industrialists and financiers were attracted by the potential of licensing designers' names to mainstream products such as scents and scarves. The catwalk collections, traditionally the mainstay of the designers' business, were reduced to little more than a promotional ploy.

Given that it is easier to secure licenses with established names, the investors tended to concentrate on the older houses. The only significant exception was Arnault's decision to launch Christian Lacroix in his own house. Otherwise the new owners concentrated on trying to rejuvenate the established houses by hiring new designers and firing the old ones. Gianfranco Ferré was installed as the new designer at Dior, Martine Sitbon at Chloé and Claud Montana at Lanvin.

The arrival of the new investors, with their armies of accountants and lavish marketing strategies, has raised the cost of running a fashion house. It is now too expensive for young designers to open their houses and revitalise the industry as Gaultier, Gigli and Galliano did in the 80s. The young designers of the 90s are more likely to work freelance for one of the new investors.

It is too soon to say what sort of commercial constraints the investors will impose on the creativity of their designers. But it is not difficult to envisage a scenario whereby the Paris and Milan fashion houses follow the precedent set in New York where the designers concentrate on churning out classic collections for middle-aged customers.

Designer fashion is not dead. But it will take more than an economic revival and a swing against anti-fashion to revive it. The fashion fetishism of the 80s already looks like an anachronism. The designers of the 90s seem set to return to the more marginal roles they played in the 60s and 70s.

The old game is over for the fashion designers. The new game won't be so much fun.