

Vivienne Westwood in Context and Englishness in Her Work

Kyung Hee Choi[†]

Dept. of Clothing & Textiles, Seoul National University

(Received April 11, 2005 : Accepted October 10, 2005)

Abstract

A representative British designer, Vivienne Westwood's work world from radical punk style to aristocratic historical dress is explored in context in terms of Englishness. National identity opens up into the process of mobilization of collective sentiment in the national context, unlike nationalism, and Englishness signifies the idea or emotion of England in contrast with Britishness, the political constructor influenced by geographical aspects. There is no doubt that Vivienne Westwood is central to ideas about creativity and originality in English design on subculture. However, in evaluating a designer and her work we should consider the entire context surrounding her from a broader view, rather than arguing only her own ingenuity. In this article, through reconsidering her originality in the historical reference as well as the resistant punk style in aspect of fluid national identity, I show a case of a constituted Englishness, forged by Vivienne Westwood as a cultural creator of national identity. Vivienne Westwood's case hints the complexities of national culture, which constantly shifts, translating her understandings of history and culture into fashion in her contemporary insight and glamorous ways.

Key words : Vivienne Westwood, national identity, Englishness, punk, historical dress.

I. Introduction

Fashion, generally speaking, indicates the prevailing objects of a time or their spreading processes within societies. That is, fashion is a material object with the innumerable possibilities of change and a sign as the means of non-linguistic communication, which eventually contribute to social dimensions. Barnard (1996) maintains that fashion can not only be considered as reproductive practices, but also be explained in terms of resistance as a series of ongoing challenges and oppositions. Thus in socio-cultural view, fashion both offers the continuity to a society and plays

a role as a dynamic for creating changes in society.

This function of fashion in terms of the continuity and change in society can contrive to articulate a national identity by fashion. According to Philip Schlesinger (1987), national identity is to be understood as a particular kind of collective identity. In other words, it is an identity constituted at a given strategic level of a society.¹⁾ Nikolaus Pevsner (1956) suggests that English national characteristics are constantly in a state of flux. Thus, we are able to deduce the fluidity of national identity with the change in the society. Such the characteristic of national identity might imply its potential similarity to

[†] E-mail : samchi28@hanmail.net

¹⁾ Philip Schlesinger, "On national identity: some conceptions and misconceptions criticized," *Social Science Information* (1987): 259.

that of fashion in a collective phenomenon with limitation on time and space.

British fashion comes into the international spotlight for the diversity and creativity of its design in 21C, the present. More specifically, it began with the emergence of a distinctive cultural vision called as punk, led by young people in the late 1970s and early 1980. In a turn, British fashion has drawn on a paradoxical combination of radical avant-garde and classical tradition, which has shaped ideas of national image in Britain for the next 20 years. And on the centre of the change there is Vivienne Westwood, a British representative fashion designer admitted internationally, not only within Britain.

Vivienne Westwood has come to embody the powerful, subversive elements of British creativity, and has developed the ideas of history and tradition as well as anarchy and irony, which have inspired Englishness. Her experimental styles took centre stage with the international focus on the new British fashion of the 1980s, that of the post-punk revolution of Vivienne Westwood and new designer generations who follow her, such as John Galiano and Alexander McQueen.²⁾ In this way, Vivienne Westwood has given rise to sensational contradictions continually as a frontier of social revolution and has articulated a kind of Englishness in fashion. In this respect, Vivienne Westwood's work reveals two main aspects: She embodies the resistant spirit of high street youth subculture as 'Punk style', which has become a symbol of English avant-garde in a radical way on one hand. Her historical dress consists of a continual dialogue with the past and reconfigures icons of English royalty and tradition on the other hand. Thus there are nostalgia of the past and innovative landscape of gender and class, which rely on images of Englishness in her clothes.

In terms of the relationship of fashion and Englishness, at first it will be necessary to consider some matters of how Englishness is constituted to its conception today and how the agen-

da of a specialized fashion designer as a creative entrepreneur has an influence on the imagined community at a given time. For this in this essay I will explore Vivienne Westwood's various design scopes from high-edged punk style to aristocratic historical dress as a case study. The aim of the following discussion is to analyse, interpret, and evaluate her original works in which she constituted an overall essence of Englishness in social, cultural, historical, and artistic context as well as her individual design philosophy. In particular, I will separate Vivienne Westwood's work world into two parts broadly; that is, one period for punk styles, which go back to the early 1970s and the other for historical references from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s chronologically. It is because I regard the two styles as representing her Englishness most effectively in spite of her different stages, including new romantics. In my view, in case of investigating her punk clothes in context rather than just evaluating her as a fashion reformer, we will comprehend Vivienne Westwood as an active cultural agent. Furthermore considering this overall context, we will detect Englishness represented in her historical references, which eventually contribute to create a new English tradition. In the following I will start with the conception of national identity and the definition of Englishness in comparison with Britishness, then deal with the matters of Englishness reflected in Vivienne Westwood's work.

II. National Identity and Englishness in Dress

Schlesinger (1987) sees national identity as a particular kind of collective identity, constituted in a society. His view includes the following some categories: First he stresses collective action as a continually constituted and reconstructed category rather than a prior condition of collective action. Second he argues that national identity is constructed within a definite social

² Catherine McDermott, *Made in Britain* (London: Mitchell Beazley, 2002), 152-155.

space, which includes national culture for national cultural space. Here the national culture reproduces distinctions between 'us' and 'them' at the intra-national level in line with the structure of social divisions and relations of power and domination, not only at the international level. Third national identity is a chronic process. It implies that the relationship of the present of a national collectivity and its past should be understood, as an imaginary one, mediated by the continual, selective reconstitution of 'traditions' and of 'social memory.' In short, national identity is an activist and meaning-constructing conception, confined by time-space frame. These categories direct our attention to the role of cultural institutions and practices through which the chain of identity between past and present is forged. Most importantly it makes us consider the special role of cultural producers as active constructors of national identity.

In the 1950s, a German art historian, Nikolaus Pevsner (1956) in his book, *The Englishness of English Art* suggests that the idea of 'Englishness' like all other national identities is predicated upon a collection of mediated memories and 'inventions of tradition'. He also suggests that the ephemeral surfaces of fashionable dress are as heavy with nationalist sentiment as any visual and folk art. Eventually, he concludes that national characteristics are constantly in a state of flux. And according to Benedict Anderson (1991), nationalism, namely 'narrative of identity' follows that we might define Englishness as 'romantic' with perception, feeling and emotion in contrast with Britishness as a political construct, a description of "the State or of other institutions and practices in which all the constituent parts of Britain...shared."³ Therefore, I will regard the 'romantic' notion of Englishness in dress as the idea of England rather than England itself, so refer to Englishness, not Britishness to consider national identity in fashion

in this essay.

Englishness itself can be considered in various ways. In the eighteenth century there was a political climate where Englishness was defined both in practical and philosophical terms, for example, such as the case of the dress with relatively inexpensive materials like wool and cotton, and the creation of functional garments like the masculine riding habits for women and the sober coloured frock coats for men. Eccentricity was also a particularly English trait. With regard to women, one might pick out the different ways in which femininity has been heightened and parodied from the vast hooped skirts of the late Elizabethan period, the Victorian bustle, the miniskirt of the 1960s and so on. Pevsner points out that the English sense of humour involves a feeling that clothes do not mean to be taken too seriously and one aspect of being tongue-in-cheek in the past was to dress up in portraiture. In addition, the linkage of clothing with political protest had become a particularly English concern, manifesting itself in such ways as for example the punk movement of the 1970s (Fig. 2), the protest T-shirts of the 1980s, and so on, just as it was primarily English styles of dress which set the agenda in this context in the French Revolution.

Eventually these characteristics of Englishness in dress drew on a unique combination of history, tradition, and street culture represented by punk, which shapes a paradox of classic style and eccentric one as national image in Britain. The following case of Vivienne Westwood, itself reflects Englishness.

III. Punk, Anarchy, and Street Culture

In the late 1970s, Britain experienced a cultural revolution with the explosion of the Punk subculture, which must be judged as Britain's most original contribution to post-war culture.

³ Christopher Breward, Becky Conekin, Caroline Cox, ed., *The Englishness of English dress* (Oxford · New York: BERG, 2002), 15-17.

Punk ideas were rooted in the old-style cultural freedom of 'Liberal Studies', an ethos that encouraged individual personal interests, ranging from the conventional to the wild and the idiosyncratic.⁴ It appeared as a reaction against the massive commercialisation of both music and fashion for boring and routine the young's music and fashion, and it first developed as a sort of 'do-it-yourself' culture. We will first need to investigate some aspects of punk, the new cultural stream at that time in order to explore Vivienne Westwood.

Barnard (1996) indicates that punk may be understood as an attack on the larger economic system, quoting Hebdige (1979)'s mention in *Subculture: the meaning of style*, "beneath the clownish make-up there lurked the unaccepted and disfigured face of capitalism...a divided and unequal society was being eloquently condemned." Thus it gave a birth as an attempt to challenge both the mainstream bourgeois culture and the capitalist system that promoted its insipid products in an economic aspect. However, this opposition to the dominant bourgeois culture of punk was evident in terms of class rather than gender or ethnicity, and that it represented a considerable challenge to the values of the dominant classes. Punk may be understood as offering a thorough critique and a reversal of the valuation given to colours, textures and materials in the dominant system in an aesthetic aspect.

To tell the truth, it is undeniable that the combination of Malcolm McLaren, Vivienne Westwood, and the Sex Pistols was major instrumental in shaping and encouraging Punk and the innovative designs in punk fashion. According to McDermott (1999), Westwood and McLaren launched the new spirit of Punk and it became an attitude that made English style totally unique at the end of the 1970s, rendering their customers participants of a counter culture. Actually, they made a powerful statement, such as selling leather mini skirts with chains (Fig.

1), T-shirts with holes (Fig. 2), dyeing their hairstyles with pink and green colour, putting safety pins (Fig. 3) and so on, with an enormous capacity to understand the culture of their time. They used the subcultural world of sexual deviancy and pornography to attack the establishment in line with avant-garde 1970s art, like Dada and Surrealist. <Fig. 2> shows Vivienne



<Fig. 1> Leather mini skirt and 'Venus' T-shirt, (1971).



<Fig. 2> Vivienne Westwood in 'Destroy' T-shirt, (1977).

⁴ Catherine McDermott, *Vivienne Westwood* (London: CARLTON, 1999), 12.



〈Fig. 3〉 Punk hairstyle and safety pin.



〈Fig. 4〉 Punk album of Sex Pistols.

Westwood in 1977 wearing a 'Destroy' muslin T-shirt. It is formed from two squares of fabric with elongated, straitjacket-like sleeves caught back with D-rings, and printed with the word 'destroy' and a swastika. Vivienne Westwood with Malcolm McLaren used highly charged slogans and provocative images in a deliberate attempt to provoke the establishment in this way.

It is natural that the cooperation between Vivienne Westwood and Punk should not be unrelated with her personal background. She, the daughter of a working class couple was the product of the conventional working-class values of the post-war years, and for her, the twentieth century male pin-up is Elvis Presley. This influenced her first shop, opened on the London's Kings Road, in 1971 called 'Let It Rock', selling the clothing for Teddy Boys, who were the true inheritors of an original working class culture and they embodied the appeal of raw sex.

As a matter of fact, it is also certain that the socio-cultural situations at their time had already prepared for something bold, energetic and outrageously shocking, even without them. That is to say, the suppression of a new generation by an older generation has already been identified, and socio-economic factors just need to be visualised (Fig. 4). So, Polhemus (1994) states as the following: Especially in the UK, rising unemployment and general economic stagnation

gave the Punks' nihilistic battle-cry of 'No Future!' a credible ring of truth. Culturally, too, things were at low ebb: Abba was dominating the UK charts, with 'Mamma Mia' and 'Dancing Queen' both staying at number one. In the broader arts picture, it was a time lacking in creative flair and innovation, which challenged the demarcation line between art and pornography. Most importantly, there was no denying the fact that the Age of Aquarius was indefinitely on hold as the rock stars by 1976. In addition, now Punk is appropriated by the capitalist system and adopted by the dominant classes in line with the essential nature fashion with losing the first resistant spirit.

However, it is certain that British fashion has received a powerful stimulus such as the street and youth, since Vivienne Westwood's innovation. Now British street culture represented by punk actually constitutes a kind of fashion discourse of Englishness by the related media. Indeed, British fashion speaks of rebellion, ideology, and group identity, and it reveals the sense of show and theatre so much a part of British culture just as the anarchy of punk was largely a stylistic form of symbolic protest at past. Even though its initial resistant meaning becomes obsolescent, it is obvious that Vivienne Westwood is the creative author who inspires

the anarchy of punk to young observers and street culture by the conspicuous communicating style, so leads the prior discourses of Englishness today.

IV. Historical Dress, Aristocracy, and New Tradition

British design has two key characteristics, funky and accidental but classic and sophisticated in contrast. Until now, major concerns for Vivienne Westwood have usually been focused only on the fact that she would appropriate anarchy punk culture in the 1980s to embody it to the most contemporary British fashion. However, the point to make her a more British fashion designer will consist in her reference to English aristocratic tradition with parodying it in her historical view and inspiring new international directions to her work.

Most of all English tradition has been linked to a well-established taste for biography, a taste, which, of necessity, involved representations of the past. Vivienne Westwood has been equally infected with enthusiasm for the past, and for her historical dress has been a potent source of Englishness. She had the zeal of a nineteenth-century dress reformer, but she urged people to wear clothing that is more dramatic, more glamorous, that tells stories of the past. She re-configured icons of royalty and tradition, so her clothes might rely on images of Englishness, especially on the England of aristocracy and empire. (Fig. 5) describes an extravagant, rustling silk ballgown in her Café Society collection A/W 1998, which empowers the wearer by its sheer volume and extravagance.

This visual impact of Westwood's is remarkable especially on her collections from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, when she really established and elaborated her own design philosophy. It can be illustrated by the following examples. In 1986 S/S mini-crini Collection, she played with ideas of heightened femininity by framing the body in a swaying bell-shaped skirt, that is, abbreviated version of the mid-nineteenth-



(Fig. 5) Café Society collection, A/W (1998).

century crinoline (Fig. 6). In 1987-8 A/W Harris Tweed Collection, the suit, crini and fake ermine cape were used with English and Scottish traditions and fabrics as a source of both inspiration and parody. It was named after the woollen fabric hand-woven in the Western Isles of Scotland. In 1993-4 A/W Anglomania Collection, the mini-kilt tartan ensembles showed the French craze for Englishness during the 1780s (Fig. 7). And In 1994-5 A/W On Liberty Collection Westwood's sentiment for English countryside is matched by her love of traditional



(Fig. 6) Mini-crini collection, S/S (1985)



〈Fig. 7〉 Anglomania collection, A/W (1993).

fabrics like bright red tartan ensemble with the jacket with nineteenth-century puffs, the asymmetry of the dress hem, and the padded bustle strapped across the model's bottom (Fig. 8).

On one aesthetic hand, Vivienne Westwood appropriates the mythologies and symbolism of the English aristocracy to create clothing that affects the way the wearer feels about their body, constructing often complex designs that produce a very different relationship between fabric and flesh from most late twentieth-century fashions: dynamic clothes, the image which has



〈Fig. 8〉 On Liberty collection, A/W (1994).

propaganda value and demands public attention just as a great artist of the seventeenth century, Van Dyck's portrait. The 'Boucher' corset printed with a detail from Boucher's *Daphnis and Chloë* (1743-5) is romantic and historically accurate, but also surprisingly practical by using stretch fabrics to allow ease of movement (Fig. 9).

On the other socio-economic hand, her nostalgic pursuit for the past may be interpreted in the same as Kevin Tester asserted that nostalgia, 'revolves around a desire for something absent.' from the fact that much of the work under discussion was designed during the recession of the early 1990s. In addition, Westwood's work has also been controversial in such social dimensions as gender and class. In gender, women in the mini-crini collection can take such a dashing and heroic figure as men, in clothes that are just as much about constructing an idealized, theatricalized femininity as they are about representing national identity, according to her mention like goddesses or monsters. In this way, she creates clothes bringing together familiar elements and fracturing their usual meanings by placing them in a new context. In class, the traditional fabric of country living and its mono-toned landscaped colours in Harris Tweed Collection showed authentic English elitism, while demonstrating her affection for traditional dress and the ideals of elitism that she felt it embodied. While playing on the interrelated themes of Englishness and class throughout her work, she not only provides



〈Fig. 9〉 'Boucher' corset.

a critique of the upper classes, but also exposes the snobbery of the fashion industry, which spent much of the late 1980s revelling in traditional status symbolism. Westwood's nostalgia for mythical cultured elite provides a critique of the upper classes and also of the idea that the images of royalty and aristocracy that are routinely paraded as symbols of English national identity could ever adequately summarize the cultural diversity that exists in this country. In this way she wilfully transgresses fixed ideas of the gender, class, ethnicity and sexuality that the establishment stands for and shows up both formal and informal uniforms as theatre.

An irony of Westwood's work consists in reference to not only the past but also foreign countries. Her clothes stand for Englishness yet illuminate the fissures in English culture, the exclusions because of ethnicity as well as class and gender, which are part of English identity too. Westwood is not accurately replicating English history, but rather reinventing it to create an idealized form of utopian dress, since its representation of Englishness are perhaps easier to perceive from the outside than from within, where its exploration and transgression of cultural identity is too close to home. In this way, Westwood uses her clothes to teach about a new culture, namely an 'imagined' culture. In Clint Eastwood collection A/W 1984-85 that hankered after the wide open spaces seen in Western films: 'Sometimes you need to transport your idea to a world that doesn't exist and then populate it with fantastic looking people.' the garments were smothered in Italian company logos and Day-Glo patches inspired by Tokyo's neon signs (Fig. 10). Westwood's clothes help to reappraise English culture and create a new English tradition from her historical references.

V. Conclusion

From radical punk style to aristocratic historical dress I have explored Vivienne Westwood herself and her world with relation to Englishness. It is evident that her creativity and



〈Fig. 10〉 Clint Eastwood collection,
A/W (1984-85).

controversy will remain for all her lives and continue to contribute to contemporary fashion design. In particular, Vivienne Westwood is central to ideas about creativity in British fashion design and its originality on subculture, its sense of the edge, its narrative themes. However, from the case of Vivienne Westwood and Englishness my main concern has been for the specialized role of creative intellectuals in the process of imagining and constituting a national community.

In fact, Vivienne Westwood as an innovator of punk style gave birth with the periodic resistant atmosphere in context. But I want to argue that her important contribution to the contemporary fashion lies in less the innovation of punk style and street culture than the invention of new tradition from the punk fashion, which constitutes the discourse of Englishness in the world after it. In addition, in her historical reference we need to pay attention to how she referred to English history and culture to express English national identity as well as to capture contemporary insights.

According to Schlesinger (1987), the concept of national identity is distinguished from that of nationalism in order to open up a more disci-

minating way into the process of mobilization of collective sentiment in the national context. Kammen (1978) suggests that collective notions of nationality might be usefully explored by means of a cultural history, which is especially attentive to the construction of national traditions in popular culture. Tradition has always been the pivot around which British culture revolves, including the reactions against it in the form of shocking or humorous eccentricity. Indeed British fashion has oscillated between these two poles of tradition and eccentricity; punk and pagantry. Such extremes always seek a means of expression beyond existing channels, so tradition may be the cause of the acceptance of this creative aggression.

Between tradition and innovation, hierarchy and anarchy Vivienne Westwood enables the one to exist the other. She uses the point that images of Englishness are not mutually exclusive or contradictory, but complementary. Thus, the kind of 'heritage' clothing, such as Burberry coats, Savile Row suits, cashmere twin-sets are part of one kind of white Anglo-Saxon Englishness, in contrast to the kind of adventurous street style dress, initiated by English subcultures from the 1950s.

At this moment we can find out that a dress may be modified by some active individual entrepreneurs though it reflects the customs and aesthetics of any given age. In this point, the case of Vivienne Westwood will present an obvious standard. The series of her works hint the complexities of national culture, which constantly shifts, soaking up foreign influences and remaking icons of the past. On the basis of her view of intelligent knowledge and experience, Vivienne Westwood pursued for understanding history and culture and translated them into fashion in her own dramatic, more glamorous ways. Such her contemporary thoughts and sharp insights toward English tradition and history lead us the way to a new imagined community of Englishness today.

Just as hegemony is a moving battle that must be constantly re-fought and re-won in order that

the dominant classes retain their dominance, fashion is characterized by its logic of organizational and aesthetic mutations, which Lipovetsky (1987) called 'a logic of l'éphémère'. In conclusion, the empire of fashion is a social device, which bears the contemporary cultural values and significations preparing another novelty all the same time. In this position we can detect that the dynamic characteristic of national identity might have a similarity to that of fashion in terms of an ephemeral collective sentiment, as Vivienne Westwood invented new tradition, which represents Englishness in a contemporary.

References

- Barnard, M. 1996. *Fashion as communication*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Beward, C., Conekin, B., and Cox, C., ed. 2002. *The englishness of English dress*. Oxford · New York: BERG.
- Bruzzi & Gibson ed. 2000. *Fashion cultures: Theories, explorations and analysis*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Huygen, F. 1989. *British design: image & identity*. London: Thames and Hudson.
- Jang, A. 1998. "Semiotic interpretation of Vivienne Westwood's works reflected punk rock." *The Korean Society of Costume* 39.
- Krell, G. 1997. *Fashion memoir Vivienne Westwood*. London: Thames and Hudson.
- Lipovetsky, G. 1987. *L'empire de l'éphémère*. Paris: Editions Gallmard.
- McDermott, C. 1999. *Vivienne Westwood*. London: Carlton.
- McDermott, C. 2002. *Made in Britain*. London: Mitchell Beazley.
- Polhemus, T. 1994. *Streetstyle: from sidewalk to catwalk*. London: Thames and Hudson.
- "Punk wave-Vivienne Westwood" (retrieved Nov. 2003); available from World Wide Web @ <http://www.mital-u.ch/PunkWave/index.html>
- Schlesinger, P. 1987. "On national identity: some conceptions and misconceptions criticized." *Social science information*, 259.
- Steele, V. 1991. *Women of fashion: Twentieth-*

century designers. New York: Rizzoli.

“Vivienne Westwood- exhibition” in Victoria and Albert museum (London, 01 April to 11 July 2004).

Vivienne Westwood- exhibition archives (retrieved 01 April 2005); available from World Wide Web @ http://www.vam.ac.uk/vastatic/microsites/1231_vivienne_westwood/exhibition.html.

List of Illustration

1. “Vivienne Westwood- exhibition” in Victoria and Albert museum (London, 01 April to 11 July 2004).
2. Vivienne Westwood- exhibition archives (retrieved 01 April 2005); available from World Wide Web @ http://www.vam.ac.uk/vastatic/microsites/1231_vivienne_westwood/exhibition.html
3. Punk wave-Vivienne Westwood (retrieved Nov. 2003); available from World Wide Web @ <http://www.mital-u.ch/PunkWave/index.html>
4. Punk wave-Vivienne Westwood (retrieved Nov. 2003); available from World Wide Web @ <http://www.mital-u.ch/PunkWave/index.html>
5. Vivienne Westwood- exhibition archives (retrieved 01 April 2005); available from World Wide Web @ http://www.vam.ac.uk/vastatic/microsites/1231_vivienne_westwood/exhibition.html
6. “Vivienne Westwood- exhibition” in Victoria and Albert museum (London, 01 April to 11 July 2004).
7. Vivienne Westwood- exhibition archives (retrieved 01 April 2005); available from World Wide Web @ http://www.vam.ac.uk/vastatic/microsites/1231_vivienne_westwood/exhibition.html
8. McDermott, Catherine, 1999. Vivienne Westwood. London: Carlton.
9. Vivienne Westwood- exhibition archives (retrieved 01 April 2005); available from World Wide Web @ http://www.vam.ac.uk/vastatic/microsites/1231_vivienne_westwood/exhibition.html
10. McDermott, Catherine, 1999. Vivienne Westwood. London: Carlton.