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**Femininity, Freedom and Fragility: Fashion and Violence in the Designs of
Elsa Schiaparelli, c.1933 - 1939**

In 1934, *Vogue* wrote that ‘exhalations of fragility abound.’¹ What kind of fragility did it refer to? How were women fragile within life, and how was this reflected, expressed, and addressed by their clothing? Within the same article, the author went on to state that ‘women are genuinely trying to regain the kingdom of power.’ Given the article’s context within a high fashion magazine, how, precisely, could this effort to defeat fragility be manifested sartorially? Was there a tangible, visible endeavor to regain ‘power’ within dress? And what did such references to fragility and power allude to? By the mid-late 1930s, political events began to overshadow Europe and America, and impacted fashion, as the threat of the Second World War began to hover ominously. Elsa Schiaparelli has typically been noted for her playful, flirtatious, Surrealist and artistic tactics. However, during the later 1930s, pieces began to emerge within her otherwise high-spirited collections that revealed a frisson of the tension and anxiety that emerged on the international, contextual scene. This article will take Schiaparelli as a case study, and examine key examples of her output at this time that express explicit, physical violence. It will consider how they can be seen to enable women to cope with the violent onslaught

¹ *Vogue*, New York, March 15th, 1935, p. 73.

of modernity through an aesthetic of attack.

Elegant lines of cream cotton in a corded weave fall gracefully from neatly pleated shoulders, to an elegant mid-calf level [fig. 1]. Weighty folds give a sense of high quality, stylish comfort, and ease. A well-placed collar, finished to confident, flattering points, sets off the ensemble with assurance. However, strategically placed pockets begin to raise questions about the conformity of this fashionable piece. Their raised position deliberately evokes contemporary hunting jackets, such as in fig. 2, and the flaps are fully functional, deepening this sense of sturdy practicality. Schiaparelli was by no means the first designer to take influence from violent pursuits by ca.1933, when she produced this piece. Such crossovers had occurred centuries previously, but particularly peaked with the onset of the First World War. For example, in October 1914, just as the conflict had begun, the British newspaper *The Guardian* wrote that 'one is decidedly struck with the tendency to adopt - or rather adapt - several military styles',² and it specifically referenced 'coats and capes', much like Schiaparelli's later version, as being especially receptive to this. Whilst such adaptations concurred on the level of line and form, to the foundation of Schiaparelli's piece, as described, she highlighted and exaggerated this tendency to a new level. Whilst two lines of buttons stand strikingly down the center, in a conventional, double-breasted style, the buttons themselves are far from conventional. From a distance, they appear to be elegant,

² *The Guardian*, 26th October 1914

uniform pieces of molded brass. Upon closer inspection, however, they have been modeled to resemble convincing bullet casings. Indeed, their resemblances to fig. 3, which shows contemporary examples, reveals the detail to which this has been carried out, and it makes the link between the bullet case, and the associated bullet inside. That in Schiaparelli's case, this exists in prompted imagination alone, for only the casing itself is evident, does not weaken the potential power and violence of the perceived bullet within.

Bullets were not the only objects that Schiaparelli employed in order to subvert norms and expectations, to question and counter conventionality and add a frisson of fun. Nevertheless, in other collections, such objects took more innocuous forms, such as shells or lips. The seemingly sudden, and adamantly explicit introduction of violence onto an otherwise refined, traditional, though no less fashionable and thoughtfully-designed coat, then, makes a deliberate statement. On one hand, she characteristically played with the already implicit elements of hunting of the coat, which themselves were carefully designed, by making the reference considerably more exaggerated. It overtakes previous military influences, and creates a cunning, knowing dialogue. Yet, on the other hand, developments in the international scene were beginning to deteriorate, and this sudden exaggeration, on a very specific theme, resonates precisely and hauntingly. In January that year, Adolf Hitler was appointed chancellor of Germany. While the consequences of this could not be fully appreciated at the time, other concurrent and consequent events

pointed towards an unfavorable outcome, including the Reichstag Fire, and subsequent decree of the same name, completion of the first concentration camp, setting up of the Gestapo secret police, the officialisation of Hitler's dictatorship, and the legalisation of eugenic sterilisation. Whilst the locus and biggest impact of such happenings was clearly in Germany, its implications were to affect the wider international scene. For example, in the same year, the Four Power Pact was signed between Germany, France, Britain and Italy, which, according to contemporary sources in Britain and France, such as the (British-published) *International Press Correspondence*, provoked 'uneasiness' and 'watchfulness'³ despite having been conceived by Mussolini supposedly to promote the opposite. Furthermore, on 12th August that year, Winston Churchill gave a public speech warning that Germany was rearming, and emphasized the danger this posed. This plethora of disquieting events, of which the above are but a selection, was reported widely across Europe and America, and their occurrence within the same year as the production of Schiaparelli's piece, due to their ubiquity, seems unlikely to be a coincidence. Rather, by escalating military crossover in dress to this scale, in much the same way as political events were escalating, she made a direct comment. The context of this comment, of course, was manifested in dress, and thereby upon the body(/ies) of the (female) wearer(s). In this light, the placement of the bullets has particular resonance. Contrasting the coat's pale wheat hue in dark brass, they form two strong, direct lines, running from either side of the wearer's neck and

³ *International Press Correspondence*, vol. 13, 1933, p. 631.

down the torso. Their placement is assertive, unapologetic, and unmistakable: certainly one of the most evident and noticeable elements of the piece. What is the implication of an overtly military object being so purposefully placed in this way? On one hand, removing bullets from their usual context, and placing them, quite literally, onto the female body brings them into physical contact with (potential) violence. However, the consequences were not necessarily negative or passive. Whilst the main body of the coat is more unassuming, the bullets serve to confound, and shock, the viewer, upon realization of their form, especially if they had not been identified at first sight. This then acts to counter the male gaze, which women were increasingly exposed to during the interwar period, as they gained more and more independence to navigate the modern city alone. Furthermore, in relation to the escalating turbulence of events in 1933, the presence of the bullet cases served as a walking sign, and reminder, of mounting anxiety, showing Schiaparelli's engagement with the wider world, in both seriousness and at play.

Such anxiety continued to mount, and, for example, in 1936, civil war broke out in Spain, which would go on to shoot unrest into Europe and America, causing external action to be taken. Although America remained neutral, it was all too aware of its implications. For instance, in 1939, *Life* magazine would comment on its impact, that it had been 'a testing ground for the tools of battle... a dress rehearsal for the next World War...', and described the 'lessons' that 'the world's

general staffs learned' as a result.⁴ Also in 1939, Benjamin Munn Ziegler commented that the 'Spanish "civil" war ha[d] rocked a none too stable world precariously to and fro',⁵ which again emphasized the repercussions it had outside of Spain, and highlighted the widespread existing tension of the time, which the civil war only served to heighten.

During the same year, Schiaparelli produced a pair of gloves [fig. 4]. They were by no means her first, and appeared within a collection that featured hands as a large theme; however, they differed considerably from their precursors and peers. Whilst other examples played with coloured fingernails and animal skins, this pair took a more somber approach. Produced in black calf velvet, the gloves are elegant, dark and refined. Yet at the end of each finger is a gilded false nail in gold. On one hand, this queried notions of the body and its boundaries, re-defining the relationship between the body and dress - fingernails are expected to lie beneath the fabric of a glove, so externalizing them is a form of subversion. Yet by producing the 'nails' in a material that does not attempt to appear natural or realistic, and is defiantly un-living and metallic, a connection can be drawn from the golden, metallic tones that the bullets of the bullet-casing coat also shared. Whilst the gloves are not directly associated with violence, they are charged with its potential. Indeed, just as there is deliberately no attempt to mimic the natural fingernail in color or texture, the nail shape itself is much more akin to claws,

⁴ *Life*, 10th April 1939, vol. 6, no. 15, p. 20.

⁵ Benjamin Munn Ziegler, *The International Law of John Marshall*, p. 11.

pointed and curved, than the average human nail. The sharp point equips the wearer with the power to wreak devastation at whim. This did something to rectify, at least conceptually, the destabilization that was currently wreaking havoc within Europe, and its repercussions in America, through allowing the wearer an opportunity to have a sense of regaining control.

This concept was clearly an important one to the designer, as two years later - within which the Spanish civil war, and affect it had on other countries, had continued (as it would until 1939) - it reappeared amongst her work in a different guise, of a ring [fig. 5]. It was comprised of three separate parts, designed to be worn on the same finger, with a capped piece at the end, and two more conventionally shaped rings to be worn along the length. However, each piece is much thicker and wider than the norm, meaning that almost the entire length of the finger is covered up. This, in conjunction with its tough construction materials, of metal and diamond, and the way it allowed the finger joints to move freely despite the hard overlay, lends a distinctly armor-like quality. This serves to support the sharp pointed piece, designed for the tip of the finger: a destructive weapon that can be used with the assistance of armored protection. Not only did it provide a protective layer for a section of the body commonly exposed, but it enhanced this quality with the assurance of a prospective weapon.

The same year, Schiaparelli produced her *Tear Dress* [fig. 6], which also employed

tropes of concealment and exposure, on a larger scale. It appeared amongst her Circus collection, but decidedly differed from its accompanying garments, which in theme took after the title. Originally pale blue, and now faded to an off-white hue, the outfit is an elegant ensemble, carefully skimming and flattering the contours of the body, and crowned with a flowing, matching veil. Breaking up this smooth surface, however, is a profuse pattern, composed of dark pink and purple abstract, splattered shapes, each mirrored by a small black and light pink design below. In this way, they deliberately take the form of *trompe-l'oeil* tears or rips, with the lower half of each shape resembling a piece of hanging, torn fabric. This is a clear act of (artistic) assault, with imagined violence having been inflicted in order to impose the rips. Indeed, the contours of the ripped shapes are deliberately ragged. Nevertheless, this air of a spontaneous outburst has been carefully controlled, with smooth edges, and deliberate placements. The print is carefully designed, and executed with precision, laying seamlessly across the material. In the veil, the rips have been further exaggerated, and produced through physical cuts. Nevertheless, these too were produced with controlled, precise cuts that defy the violent act it mimics, or is, in the case of the veil, in which the lower half of each 'tear' truly does hang as a second piece of 'ripped' fabric.

This ripping was received with particular controversy. Despite widespread coverage of the Circus collection as a whole, the dress received relatively little attention, and, for example, was not reported by any French publication.

Considering Schiaparelli's stature by this point, this was a conscious decision and reflects the controversial nature of the design, and the controversy it was received with. During the same year, a torn dress provoked similar outrage. Howard Hawks' *Bringing up Baby* was released during the same month as Schiaparelli's dress was produced and displayed, February 1938. In it, the female lead, played by Katharine Hepburn, stood up during an evening out, and inadvertently revealed a prominent rip in her dress. Accordingly, her male counterpart, played by Cary Grant, was forced to farcically walk closely behind her to preserve her modesty, only to later tear his own clothing [fig. 7]. It was only due to the comedic context that this scene was passed by censors, which heavily objected to it. This once more emphasises the risk and controversy with which Schiaparelli played within her *Tear Dress*. It reveals the conservative attitudes towards women, the body and its display that prevailed within the context it was produced in and for.

Whilst the tears were original and shocking in the context of dress, similarities had appeared shortly beforehand within art. Schiaparelli worked in conjunction with Salvador Dali on the piece, who designed the print. It has close parallels with several of his paintings, produced slightly earlier, including *Three Young Surrealist Women Holding in their Arms the Skins of an Orchestra* [fig. 8], and *Necrophiliac Springtime* [fig. 9], which Schiaparelli owned, both 1936. In the latter, a single woman stands before a misty, oneiric background, sun-scorched buildings in the back, and a mysterious seated male figure in the mid-ground. Nevertheless, there

is no interaction, and her stance is decisively solitary. She wears a long, white gown, which clings to her contours before flaring out slightly towards the feet, creating an elegant yet dramatic effect that matches her stark pose. Her head is obscured and comprised entirely of flowers, which would form the basis of another interaction between Dali and Schiaparelli when she took inspiration from this element for her *Shocking* perfume bottles the following year. In this case, though, what is of relevance is the process that seems to have taken place upon, or towards the dress: rips cut up the long sleeves, destroying any semblance of modesty, and adding to the dark and used quality of the material. Clear slashes of exposed flesh appear through the shredded material, adding a sense of horror. Furthermore, this motif is subtly repeated along the main body of the dress, however it is unclear whether the darkness here represents tears, dirt, shadow, or a combination. Fig 9, however, makes this matter much clearer. Here, three women sheathed in similarly tight-fitting, full length and full sleeved gowns, though it is the central figure who is of most relevance here. In the same diagonal across the gown as in the previous painting are clear slashes and rips in the material, again exposing flesh. The Dali pieces make clear the association between flesh and dress, in a visceral manner through the medium of painting, emphasized by the surrealistic and haunting settings. When translated onto tangible, physical dress through Schiaparelli's piece, this oscillation became embodied and real.

What is the impact and implication of these rips in Schiaparelli's context, which

also oscillate on the border of control and a lack thereof, of neat seamlessness and messy violence? Dress historians have interpreted them in several ways. Dilys Blum perceives ‘torn patches of fur... as if the gown were made from an animal skin turned inside out.’⁶ Caroline Evans, on the other hand, has seen them as ‘the colors of bruised and torn flesh; yet it is completely unclear whether the illusion is meant to suggest torn fabric or flesh. Is the cloth below the “tears” textile or skin? Do the rips designate poverty (rags not riches) or some form of attack?’⁷—What both interpretations have in common is a clear association and understanding that Schiaparelli deliberately determined to invoke the violent concept of torn flesh, and conflate it with dress. Schiaparelli’s close connection to the Surrealist group, including her partnership with Dali, strengthens the conflation. One example of beauty treasured and perpetuated by the group was the Comte de Lautréamont (Isidore Ducasse)’s 1869 description of ‘the chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table’—as a simile to evoke beauty. Curiously, the objects chosen, an umbrella, sewing machine, and dissection table, all relate uniquely to the body. An umbrella shields it from the elements, a dissection table involves operating upon it, and a sewing machine constructs its clothing. Several artists made the body’s role abundantly clear, as in Oscar Dominguez’s *Electrosexual Sewing Machine* [fig. 11], and fig. 12, an illustrated plate in a Surrealist edition of *Les Chants de Maldoror*, both 1934, which each

⁶ Dilys Blum, *Shocking! The Art and Fashion of Elsa Schiaparelli*, Yale University Press, 2003, p. 139.

⁷ Caroline Evans, *Fashion at the Edge: Spectacle, Modernity, and Deathliness*, Yale University Press, 1999, p. 11.

place a woman beneath the grotesque needle of large, sewing machine contraptions. Did Schiaparelli's tears also represent an attack, and does this refer to women, the intended wearer(s) of such garb: a direct assault upon the body?

Whilst Dali directly influenced the print, and examples of strong similarities can be found in several works, another artist involved in the Surrealist group, Leonor Fini, concentrated at the time on a large number of pieces with similar themes: women wearing ripped clothing. In her 1938 *Self Portrait with a Scorpion* [fig. 10], for example, she stares directly out of the canvas, her eyebrow fiercely arched, her gaze direct, and her hand defiantly on her hip. This displays her forearm and elbow, above each of which is a large slash in her clothing. The holes are made more prominent by the fact that elsewhere, her clothing is modest to an exaggerated extent: full sleeved and coming up to the base of the neck. The shoulders are particularly pronounced with ruffled material, very much in vein of Schiaparelli's contemporaneous designs. Seemingly in order to heighten this sense of enclosure, two extra folds are present in the chest region, and excess material gathers in the sleeves. In contrast, the two patches of pale skin appear even more exposed and overt. Like Schiaparelli's tears, these are assertively cut, though in Fini's elbow, loose threads can just be seen, emphasizing the violence of the action necessary to produce such an effect. Yet she heightened this further in an even more aggressive move. She wears only one glove, in an incongruous grey shade, compared to the warm tones of the remainder of the outfit. Furthermore, it is neatly

and deliberately folded up at the base, revealing not just her wrist, but the venomous, predatory tail of a scorpion. This charged, potential violence illuminates the rest of the piece, and the red under-shirt becomes a gaping slash, fraught with the violent connotations of red explored in the previous section. Despite the ravaging that has taken place on her dress, and the imminent danger enclosed within disconcertingly close proximity to her hand, her cool gaze speaks volumes. It asserts power and control, even in the face of the greatest adversity. Her compromising position could easily translate to victimization, but the way she carries herself communicates the opposite: it is the viewer, not her, being triumphed. Can the same be said of Schiaparelli's *Tear Dress*, considering the similarities in design at play? Like Fini's ensemble, the wearer of the *Tear Dress* is surprisingly enclosed, the piece is unexpectedly modest. While the gown is strapless, it is full-length and not overly low-cut. Furthermore, the veil, whilst slightly sheer, provides additional coverage. In addition, it was presented with a pair of long gloves which covered most of the arm. The immediate impression for an onlooker is of exposed skin, yet this is trumped upon realization that, upon the body, the tears are merely a clever trick of design. The flesh-tone of the gloves works in conjunction with this, appearing nude from a distance but in actual fact protecting the skin. Therefore, the outfit initially creates an impression of vulnerability, and violation, yet poses a concealed attack upon the viewer, through being in actual fact unexpectedly in tact. Palmer White has, in other contexts of Schiaparelli's oeuvre, described what he deemed her 'hard chic' aesthetic as able

to 'protect... the New Woman from counter-attacks by the male.'⁸ In this context, not only does the dress rebound any predatory male visual advances, but it also provides protection on a greater scale: it becomes armor, directly taking on any feminine vulnerabilities and whole-heartedly rebuking them.

By this stage, Euro-American developments had intensified considerably. Nazism escalated, and in 1938 Hitler took full, singular control of the German military, and German troops occupied Austria, which led to a Europe-wide crisis. The British Ambassador to Germany attempted to pacify relations, with an agreement not to use warfare to change African borders in exchange for power, but this was refused. Alliances were made (and turned down) among several countries should war strike, including a confirmation from France that it would aid Czechoslovakia if Germany invaded, and a refusal on Britain's part that it would not side with the USSR. Despite reassurances to the contrary after the Munich agreement between Britain, France, Germany and Italy, the moves made were clearly building up to the outbreak of war. Alongside this, the ongoing Spanish Civil War, as Richard Martin has highlighted, made it clear that 'Fascism was spreading throughout Europe.' He directly related this to Schiaparelli's *Tear Dress*, asserting that 'references to shattered glass and rent fabric would have held strong implications for both the political and visual worlds.' This is certainly valid, but the same can be said of its links to the wider, and similarly threatening happenings. It embodied

⁸ Palmer White, *Elsa Schiaparelli: Empress of Paris Fashion*, Aurum Press Ltd, p. 26.

mounting fear and anxiety, and played out the potential destruction that was around the corner. Not only was pressure and anxiety prevalent in the nucleus of the modern city, but here newspaper headlines and cinema newsreels were a constant reminder of oncoming danger. Highlighting this, and placing the potential violent effects of such danger upon the body was a way to take ownership, power, and protection; a way to prepare.

Schiaparelli deliberately used notions of vulnerability, and turned them around to become cunning modes of attack, which drew on specific and outlandish tropes of violence. Over the course of the interwar period, women's experiences transformed from complete, open susceptibility to vulnerability and trauma, to a two-folded dialogue with both the problems and delights of modernity, with both hindrances and benefits, to, finally, a fused embodiment of these issues into a direct means of potentially violent defense, in critical time for when it was the most necessary, before the outbreak of an arguably even more destructive war.



Figure 1 Elsa Schiaparelli, Coat with Bullet Casing Buttons, ca. 1933



Figure 3 Franklyn's Cigarettes advertisement featuring hunting jackets, c.1914



Figure 2 Early 1930s bullet casing



Figure 4 Schiaparelli, Claw Gloves, 1938

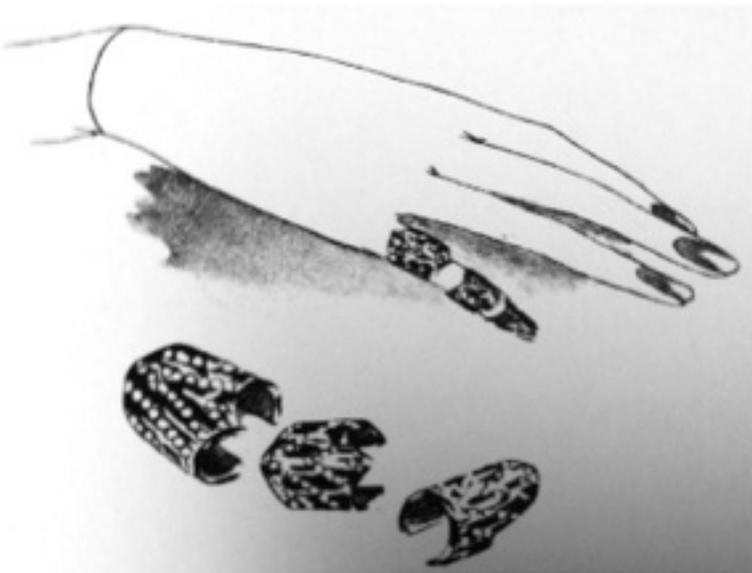


Figure 5 Schiaparelli, Claw Ring, 1938



Figure 6 Schiaparelli, Tear Dress, 1938



Figure 7 Film still, Bringing up Baby, 1938



Figure 8 Salvador Dalí, Three Young Surrealist Women Holding in their Arms the Skins of an Orchestra, 1936



Figure 9 Dalí, Necrophiliac Springtime, 1936



Figure 10 Leonor Fini, Self Portrait with a Scorpion, 1938



Figure 11 Oscar Dominguez, *Electrosexual Sewing Machine*, 1934



Figure 12 Illustrated plate from *Les Chants de Maldoror*, 1934