

The Cosmopolitanism of Commerce and the Allure of Difference: Selfridges, the Russian Ballet and the Tango 1911-14

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Abstract

This article engages with postcolonial theorisations of orientalism and challenges assumptions about the pervasiveness of imperial ideologies in Britain at the beginning of the century by exploring the adherence of Selfridges department store to the principle of 'cosmopolitanism'. The aesthetic and libidinal economy of this popular modernist commercial formation, and the distinctive positioning of women consumers within it, is investigated in relation to two key cultural events promoted by Selfridges in the years before the first world war: the Russian Ballet performance of Scheherazade --- based on a story from the Arabian Nights in which the women of the Shah's harem seduce the black slaves of the household --- and the tango, which is also associated with a new less constrained sexuality for women and in turn is linked --- via Valentino --- to the emerging popular form of desert romance. How do these configurations, and the fashionable ancillary merchandise spawned by them, modify our understanding of racialised and national identities? Does the gendered consumption of these exotic narratives and products and their relocation to the intimate territories of the domestic and the body, demand a shift in the way in which commerce is thought? What are the consequences for conceptualizations of sexual difference? This article, by focusing on the purchase by Selfridges' women customers of culturally-other objects of desire, aims to make a contribution both to theorisations of consumption and to the largely unresearched history of the western fascination with difference.

Key Words

Cosmopolitanism, commerce, orientalism, popular modernity, consumption, women, Selfridges, Russian Ballet, tango, race.

In the period before world war one, often considered the highpoint of modernity,¹ the London department store Selfridges was already an iconic institution. It is this status which makes it a particularly fruitful source for the development of a cartography of early twentieth century cultural transformations not only in the spheres of commerce and consumption but also in relation to issues as apparently diverse as popular sexual fantasy and transnational identifications. This article will explore some of the contradictory impulses within the aesthetic and libidinal economies of metropolitan commercial and entertainment culture during this period and will suggest that imperialist 'structures of attitude' (as Said has called them, 1994:61) were less pervasive and more fractured, or at least ambiguous, than is commonly supposed. My specific focus will be on the adoption of narratives and fashions identified loosely with the orient and Latin America by modern urban English women at the beginning of this century, and therefore on the dissonance between aspects of the English female consumer imagination and some of the dominant and better-known practices and discourses about geographical others and cultural difference. This will be done by looking at two key cultural events promoted by Selfridges in the years before the first world war --- the Russian Ballet and the tango --- which reveal, through their associations, the cosmopolitan aspirations of popular English modernity. Cosmopolitanism's more positive engagement with foreignness and abroad has tended either to be overlooked by cultural historians or diagnosed as a symptom of the wider imperialist and orientalist pathologies of the period; and the specific location of women as consumers in this formation has not been addressed at all. This is the historical and theoretical terrain I intend to visit here.

Gordon Selfridge: Moderniser and Cosmopolitan

Selfridges² was founded in 1909 by Gordon Selfridge, a self-made American entrepreneur whose class and national origins are relevant factors in this story. He had risen from stock boy to partner of Marshall Fields of Chicago, the largest and most magnificent department store in the United States, had been denied a senior partnership by Marshall Field and had come to Britain in 1907, partly out of pique, determined to make his mark and revolutionise British retailing practices. He was already an established innovator and moderniser and the London enterprise, the biggest purpose-built store in the world and the first in Britain, was indeed to have a massive commercial and cultural resonance. The launch in 1909 was preceded by the largest advertising campaign in British history³ and during the first week alone the store attracted an astonishing one and a quarter million visitors --- 'a cosmopolitan crowd', according to the press⁴. Its architecture, plate-glass windows, roof gardens, lifts and electric lighting quickly established it as a

technological and aesthetic 'monument to modernity' but it was a modernising cultural force in a number of less obvious ways as well. From the beginning Selfridge intended the store to become a 'social centre', a place where people could browse and meet; the first advertising campaign urged customers to 'spend the day at Selfridge's' and stressed that there was 'no obligation to buy'. In this way it contributed to the expansion of public leisure space, particularly for women.⁵ By reiterating in many of its adverts that its prices were 'the lowest - always' and by introducing from the outset the American innovation of sales and bargain basements, it expanded the class spectrum of its targeted customers and helped enfranchise the middle to lower-middle classes into the world of consumer citizenship. As an employer, Selfridge operated exceptionally progressive and generous practices for his day and expected his staff to identify with and benefit from the commercial project.⁶ He was a supporter of women's suffrage, advertised regularly in the feminist press and made clear his respect for the astuteness and economic power of women customers. Selfridge's style of publicity, although considered vulgarly American by rivals, was imaginative and unprecedented, and in addition to full-page advertising the store provided entertainments and exhibitions not directly related to sales in order to attract the public.⁷ As part of the routine promotion of the store, Selfridge published a daily 500-word syndicated column in several national and London newspapers in which he or a member of his staff commented on events and moods of cultural interest both inside and outside the store.⁸ These columns, the 1909 launch and 1914 five-year-anniversary souvenir books (each with about thirty five pictures by well known artists and extensive commentaries) and Selfridge's own 420-page book entitled The Romance of Commerce (in which he mounts a lengthy defence of what he considers the honourable but much maligned activity of international trade) are a rich source for an analysis of the store's self-image.⁹

The focus in this article is on Selfridge's interest in and promotion of cosmopolitanism and the way in which this reveals a complex and hitherto relatively uninvestigated popular modernist formation in which women, as consumers, play a critical part. Selfridge's adherence to transnational identifications --- which are partly a consequence of his personal and professional history and partly a reaction against trends within the contemporary structure of feeling --- may turn out to be as significant an aspect of his modernising influence as his publicity and retailing practices and may also emerge as a more important aspect of early twentieth century modernity than has been registered so far. (In this respect my analysis will refute the view of Wollen (1994) who argues that liberal cosmopolitan merchants of the nineteenth century had ceased to aspire to cosmopolitanism by the beginning of the twentieth century). Selfridge's brand of commercial cosmopolitanism is complexly located in geopolitical terms: it intersects with, yet goes against the grain, of the narratives of the moment about English tradition and Empire,¹⁰ and is not easily

accommodated within the parameters of the orientalist discourses of the period. Its specificity seems rooted partly in the appetite for the new and distinctive of the burgeoning consumer culture and partly also in Selfridge's own social aspirations and his sense of not-belonging in his acquired --- or aspired to --- class and country in which commerce and the foreign were so often disdained.¹¹ In this respect he was part of a small but economically and politically significant sector already identified by Eric Hobsbawm as 'the rare dynamic entrepreneurs of Edwardian Britain [who] were more often than not, foreigners and minority groups', mainly Americans, Jews, Germans and Quakers (1971:169), and whose uncomfortable cosmopolitan presence contributed to the reactive invention of 'the mythical Britain of travel posters and calendars' (Hobsbawm 1971:170) --- a Britain deeply implicated in the governance of empire and the defence of 'tradition'. Selfridge should be understood therefore, both as a representative of a social group of London-based international merchants and financiers who were socially marginalised by the more traditional elites, and also as an individual with an innovative cluster of views about the cultural role of the department store.

The reactive interaction between the entrenchment of ideas about the superiority of traditional English life on the one hand and the increasing investigation and adoption of what was perceived as modern, different and foreign on the other, is part of the dynamic which I want to look at in this article. The allure of difference --- the fascination that it exercises for certain people or sectors of the population some of the time --- is inextricably linked to the fact of its construction as difference and thus its simultaneous repudiation and distancing elsewhere. The cosmopolitanism of Gordon Selfridge fits into this paradigm, and while perhaps not consciously formed in reaction to the xenophobia of pre world-war-one Britain, was nonetheless bound up with it.

Selfridge's store was founded at the height of British imperialism yet he was strikingly uninterested in Empire (though he was deferential towards the monarchy).¹² What he promoted in his daily columns was a cosmopolitanism which was modern, urban and 'cultured' and which included (as Hannerz has put it in relation to the late twentieth century, 1990:239) 'an intellectual and aesthetic stance of openness towards diversity'. How far he embraced ideas which were in some ways critical of the imperialist conventions of the moment, like for instance Theosophy, for whom a proclaimed goal was 'the formation of universal human brotherhood without distinction of race, creed, sex, caste or colour' (Washington 1996:69) is not known. According to Leach, Theosophical ideas, as 'a permissive form of mind cure' which also encouraged people not to feel guilty about consuming, had a significant influence on department store owners in the United States during these years (Leach 1994:247).¹³ What we do know is that among the store's launch publicity there was a full-page advertisement which appeared in all major newspapers throughout the world and expressed a welcoming

message in twenty six different languages, including Yiddish, Japanese, Arabic, Hindi, Welsh and Esperanto (Figure 1). Selfridge made it clear that he disapproved of traditional outlooks and in his columns wrote often about how pleased he was that London was losing her 'insularity' and 'becoming really cosmopolitan' (Selfridge Editorial 5.11.11).¹⁴ The following passage provides an example of the style of his daily homilies and as well as an indication of his views:

If we take Culture in its true sense as meaning intellectual development, a refining influence, a wide intelligent outlook... the connections between Culture and Merchandising become obvious; and perhaps it can be understood best of all in relation to the modern store... Culture and insularity are never synonymous... It is those who travel... and whose instincts are cosmopolitan who have the world-wide sympathy... characteristic of the trained mind... When - as in merchandising - Anglo-Saxons turn to Latins and vice-versa for the fresh blood which is so essential, they are widening the scope of their intelligence... Every foreign market in the world is a lesson in culture for the modern merchant. There are few other occupations... which bring a man so closely in touch with foreign nationalities... In fact there are few languages and few arts, few nationalities and little literature, no moral and mental culture which cannot have some influence on Commerce as it is today (Selfridge Editorial 10.2.12).

These unconventional ideas about abroad and the transnational nature and cultural importance of commerce, which emerged in part from the conditions of international trade, are a recurring theme in the store's publicity and promotion during these years. Moreover in this passage Selfridge seems to be promoting social exchanges --- possibly even intermarriage --- between Anglo Saxons and Latins, an unusual slant at a time when eugenist ideas about racial purity and British superiority were widespread. Elsewhere he commends the modern market as a place where 'nationalities can meet on common ground. The sole distinction, personal or racial, is merely that of taste. Such a place is unique in public life' (Selfridge Editorial 11.7.12). Examples of his views about the foreign appear again in the store's 1914 Fifth Anniversary Souvenir book The Spirit of Modern Commerce where he once more promotes cosmopolitanism. Figures 2 and 3 ('Merchandise of the World' and 'Where East Meets West') both carry the same editorial caption which expresses an egalitarian and non-hierarchical attitude towards national, linguistic and racial difference:

It is our belief that no commercial institution in the world is more truly entitled to the description 'cosmopolitan' than is our own. Here meet and mingle many of the world's races, differing in customs, looks and tongues. Here East meets West and North meets South (Selfridge 1914).

Despite the refusal in the text to privilege west and north the images tell a different story (though they are presented as 'embellishments' to Selfridge's main caption, as are the congratulatory letters). So the plates are worth attention partly because of the contradictions they raise. The first shows an oriental bazaar in which a western couple, presumably British, survey foreign merchandise displayed by sales-people dressed in national costumes; the foreigners, whether from Japan or Holland, are mostly smaller than the couple who are shopping (signifying either Anglocentrism or trouble with perspective); the woman shopper is wearing an 'oriental' gown with divided skirt (to which I will return later). The second plate (Fig 2¹⁵) shows the semi-naked bodies of a man and woman from an indeterminate east --- an imagined generic somewhere else --- who are displaying and selling merchandise to a fully-dressed western couple.

Orientalism and Selfridges

The dominance of the orientalist conventions of these plates (and the influence of Said's Orientalism 1978) initially distracted me from the text and Selfridge's emphasis on and pride in the cosmopolitanism of his store and so to begin with 'orientalism' seemed the appropriate theoretical framework through which to read the imagery, which depicts an invented orient that could indeed form part of a wider discursive formation used by the west to dominate the east and other 'other' places. Yet at the same time, orientalism (however heterogeneous --- and Said's critics have pointed to the way in which the term needs to be unpacked, and its historical, geographical and discursive variations explored¹⁶) seemed insufficiently elastic to encompass the text. Moreover, in addition to the store's claim to be cosmopolitan and the celebration of transnational exchange, there are other distinctive features arising from the commercial domain which modify the usefulness of the concept and delimit its transferability to this context. These are first of all the transactions of the market --- the imperative of selling,¹⁷ and secondly the location of women as buyers, as subjects not objects of occidental fascination. The latter immediately challenges the recurring trope of orientalism in which the penetration and domination of the east is compared to the sexual possession of oriental women by western men. (See eg Said 1979:6; and Torgovnick 1990:17). There are other significant ways in which the discursive formation that I am about to describe is different from those broad regimes of 'cultural imperialism' normally subjected to what is loosely known as postcolonial criticism. Yet there are also important interconnections which imply a different kind of interactive and reactive dynamic in which, as I suggested earlier the 'traditional' forces of English culture both produce and are produced by other currents.

Said's major contribution has been to take on Foucault's approach and link the discourses of orientalism and cultural imperialism into a network of territories, imaginings and archives of colonial geography. This though tends to produce a monochromatic account (as Lowe has argued, 1991), unable to register the specificities of operation, cultural emphasis and context which are required in order to establish not only polyvalence but also contradiction and the reactive dynamic I refer to above. Nevertheless, some level of generality is useful, so before embarking on the detail of what went on at Selfridges I will sketch out three broad areas or phenomena frequently subjected to the orientalist critical gaze in order to demonstrate primarily the distinctiveness, but also the complex interconnections, of the popular cosmopolitan impulse of this pre-war moment.

Thus firstly there is the orientalism deployed in the processes of military and administrative governance in the colonies, in which the colonised are despised or else constructed as inferior. However ideas about the cultural and racial 'other' circulating in these geo-political territories do not travel unchanged to the metropolis (as Said's thesis implies). As Stoler has pointed out (1997), European supremacy abroad relied on the maintenance of difference and hence on the regulation of inter-racial sexual relations; moreover prohibitions were often formulated in response to the frequent transgression --- or fears of transgression --- between colonisers and natives. Cultural and sexual restrictions on European wives and daughters were required to be particularly stringent because of the perceived dangers of everyday continuous and intimate domestic encounters with otherness¹⁸. Yet paradoxically, these women on their return to the metropolis, where restrictions were not clear-cut, would bring with them, consume, display and share out to friends culinary and material goods that were forbidden to them in the colonies because of their symbolic proximity to the colonised (Chaudhuri 1992). These tensions of everyday colonial life are both connected to and confounded by the events I will describe.

A second strand of imperialist thought and practice --- of orientalism -- which spills over into, yet is at the same time oppositional to my narrative is expressed in the discourses of science and anthropology, and mediated by museums, exhibitions and photography in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. One of the principal preoccupations of these developing spheres of knowledge was the observation and classification of physical and psychic difference, and therefore the elaboration and consolidation of distance (see eg Coombes 1994; Green 1986; Greenhalgh 1988). Thus once more separation was at stake, which is not the case in the formation I am about to describe. Yet the curiosity about difference, the appetite for looking at and knowing the visible signs of difference in the visual cultures of exhibitions and museums --- the consuming gaze --- is present also in the commercial and entertainment cultures promoted by Selfridges.

One more strand in the broader regime of orientalist discourse to be compared briefly with what was going on at Selfridges is the orientalism of the artistic, literary and theatrical spheres, and specifically the more radical formations associated with cultural modernism at the turn of the century (though evident in literature and travel writing throughout the preceding century) in which the orient and abroad were often represented as more colourful, authentic and erotic than the west. This perspective, often of French provenance, is exemplified in the famous 1910 London exhibition 'Manet and the Post-Impressionists', curated by Roger Fry, which caused widespread critical excitement (as well as outrage and derision); included Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon*, one of the first works of fine art to declare the influence of African sculpture; and was advertised by a Gauguin painting of a native Tahitian woman. As Torgovnick (1990) and others have pointed out, a belief in the untrammelled sexuality of the 'primitive' was a recurring theme in much of this work. Among the classic literary instances from an earlier moment, and also from France, are Flaubert's *Kuchuk-Hanem* and *Salamambo* (Said 1978; Lowe 1991; Melman 1994). These artistic enunciations confirm the usefulness of distinguishing between the exoticising imagination and the more authoritarian colonising imagination and it is the former strand which is closest to the commercial domain I am about to describe, a claim which would certainly have gratified Gordon Selfridge who was so concerned in his writing to assert not only the cosmopolitanism but also the artistry and romance of commerce. Yet, as we shall see, the conventions of these exoticising narratives, in which the oriental woman is cast as object of sexual desire and the oriental landscape is treated rhetorically as erotic woman, are also different in important respects from what was going on at Selfridges.

The Russian Ballet and Oriental Fashions

On May 12th 1911 Selfridge headlined his column 'The Russians are Coming' and used it to promote the advent of the Russian Ballet to London. He described the arrival as a 'Russian invasion', but one which was to be welcomed. 'The invaders are dancers, the most splendid and distinguished in the world'; this was so, he wrote, even though they came from 'a country regarded until a few years ago as semi-barbaric, given to tyranny... and violent revolt'. So he provided in his brief trailer a frisson of excitement, a reminder to his readers of the reputed volatility and passion of Russians.¹⁹ At the same time he took the opportunity to promote the store's new Russian merchandise: 'The Saison Russe will not be confined to theatres... Selfridges has a Russian season of its own.' (Selfridge Editorial 12.5.11). A few weeks later, once the season was under way, the column referred again to the Ballet, this time to its reception: 'The Imperial Russian Ballet has

arrived at Covent Garden and has turned the heads of London'. Readers were encouraged to compare the artistic achievements and co-operation of the dancers to the creativity of the store's management and employees: 'At Selfridge's we are all keeping step to the music... the public is our audience, we have our stage managers, scene painters and our stars. Our art is the art of commerce... There is a wealth of romance' writes Selfridge with some passion (Selfridge Editorial 24.6.1911).

In fact the Russian Ballet, though with its roots in Moscow and St Petersburg, was composed mainly of dissidents and critics of the Tsar's regime who were already resident in Paris (hence the frequent French appellation, Ballets Russes) and was sponsored largely by merchant patrons of the arts (Garafola 1989). The company was directed by the famous impresario Serge Diaghilev, considered by many art historians to have been the most influential figure in the European and north American art world of the first quarter of the century, and consisted of a remarkable group of avantgarde dancers, artists, designers, choreographers, librettists and composers. The modernist impact of the repertoire extended beyond ballet because it broke not only with the conventions of classical academic dance and music but was also strikingly innovative in terms of narrative and design. The company performed in Paris in 1909 and then again in 1910 where it was an immediate artistic sensation. The first London visit was in 1911 (this is the 'invasion' referred to by Selfridge) where initially there was some uncertainty about how 'the straitlaced, puritanical, conservative and philistine English [would] react' (Buckle, 1980:233). But this was to underestimate the receptivity of large sectors of London's cultural consumers, and the Ballet quickly became the most fashionable and popular theatrical event of the period²⁰. The Sunday Times commented: 'There has been nothing like the vogue of the Russian Ballet for a generation. So attractive are their performances that many people are postponing their departure from town' (Buckle 1980:241). The reception, in this largely pre-cinema culture, was unparalleled not only in fashionable society but also among intellectuals. Leonard Woolf (Virginia's husband) compared its revolutionary impact at the time to that of Freud, Einstein, Proust, Joyce, Matisse and Picasso. Diaghilev's ballet crowned them all, he said (Garafola 1989:314) and moreover, seemed to transform London into a cosmopolitan city:

Night after night we flocked to Covent Garden,... [the] new art [was] a revelation to us benighted British... In all my long life in London this is the only instance in which I can remember the intellectuals going night after night to a theatre, opera concert or other performance as, I suppose, they... do in... Beyreuth or Paris (Woolf cited in Garafola 1989:314).

Several of the ballets in the early repertoire contained oriental themes and imagery. Peter Wollen has argued in his important essay that the company

'launched orientalism' in fashion and the art world (1987). The claim requires qualification since an interest in the orient was already well established throughout Europe long before the advent of the Ballet and in fact Garafola (1989) has suggested that its oriental repertoire was in part a response to the Parisian appetite for such flavours, while in Britain Maud Allan's sensual oriental veil dances had already achieved widespread notoriety (Bland 1998)²¹ and Liberty's department store had for many years sold oriental fashions (Adburgham 1975). However the orient of the Russian Ballet was different. It was a vibrating, brilliantly coloured, erotic and bloodthirsty orient, unlike the pastel construct of the aesthetes or the spiritual orient of Theosophy²²). Designed mainly by the Russian artist Leon Bakst, over the following years it was indeed to have a seismic and relentless influence on art, theatre, fashion and commerce.²³

The most celebrated, iconic and financially successful of the company's repertoire was Scheherazade (Schouvaloff 1996). Performed for the first time in Paris in 1910, it more than any other ballet, was to 'astound the public and change the appearance of women and drawing rooms throughout Europe and America' (as Buckle put it, 1980:155). Bakst's vision of a 'barbaric and voluptuous orient' and his set and costumes became the most famous decor of the age (Buckle 1980: 158)²⁴. More theatre than ballet, with a vivid and dramatic narrative, 'a riot of pulsating colours, orgiastic sensuality, frenetic leaps and savage rhythms' (Adburgham 1975:90) it became an instant success and after the first performance the audience applauded for a full twenty minutes (Buckle 1980:257). The story²⁵, based on the opening chapter of the Arabian Nights (or Thousand and One Nights) is of a despotic Persian king who leaves his palace to go on a hunting trip. In his absence his favourite wife and the other women of his harem bribe the eunuch guards to admit the African male slaves to their compound. The eunuchs succumb and the slaves, disguised as women, enter the internal courtyard of the palace where they are seduced by the Shah's concubines; the special golden slave, Masud (played by Nijinsky) is invited to be the lover of the Shah's favourite wife. There follows a period of intense sexual activity between the women of the harem and the slaves during which, according to the notorious Victorian translation of Richard Burton (which, in its abridged version, will have been the most familiar at the time, though its unabridged version is likely to have been known by repute²⁶), 'all fell to satisfying their lusts and they ceased not from kissing and clipping, coupling and carousing till day began to wane' (Burton 1919:6). The Shah and his hunters return unexpectedly and enraged by the betrayal, massacre the slaves and the concubines with their scimitars on stage. Only the favourite wife is spared but she finally commits suicide. The curtain falls on a stage littered with the corpses of the illicit lovers.

Contemporary accounts of the ballet stress the passion, the violence, the piercing music and unfettered movement, and above all the visual excitement of the decor and performance. Not much is made, in these or in more recent histories I have looked at, of the racial and gendered aspects of the narrative or of the connotations at the time of Burton's translation of the Arabic text, on which the narrative was based. Yet these must have had an extraordinary resonance and have played a part, however unacknowledged, in the subsequent uptake of oriental fashions in the west. In relation to race, the original ballet designs are unambiguous (see Figure 4). The Persian women are represented as white (or without colour) and the slaves as black. In the early ballet performances the dancers who played the part of slaves were blacked-up (see Figure 5, a photograph of a 1910 performance in Paris, which also gives an indication of Bakst's decor).²⁷ Figure 6 shows Bakst's original design for Masud, variously called the golden negro or the golden slave but in fact photographs of Nijinsky's performance show that he was less blacked-up than the other slaves²⁸.

The racial dimensions of the story will certainly have had a more problematic resonance in the early twentieth century metropolises of the western world than in their original Muslim context (Melman 1994:155). British audiences will have been reared on the prohibitions of Empire and medical ideas of difference yet they are also likely to have been aware of Burton's late nineteenth-century esoteric footnote in his translation of this section of Arabian Nights about the 'imposing' sexual organs of Africans (Burton 1919:6) and his more general preoccupation with the sexual inadequacy of the western male. They are additionally likely to have been familiar with the more recent contentious reputation of modernist African and 'primitive' art (Torgovnick 1990). Under these circumstances the ballet experience will have been both disturbing and exciting. Gilman's exploration of modernist perceptions of black sexuality attempts to identify some of the components of this cultural fascination and distinguish between the inflections of the British (colonising) and European (exoticising) imagination (Gilman 1985:125; Lowe 1991). The British consumption of Scheherazade appears to have collapsed these distinctions - and in this sense represented a cultural revolt against its own more paternalistic imperial tradition. The heady corporeal mix of the ballet narrative disrupted not only the racial conventions of the period but also ideas about masculinity, femininity and sexual politics. Women in this narrative make use of the absence of the despotic patriarch to resist his authority and betray him, an ominous message about the absence of men --- in the colonies, at war and work --- and the domestic entrapment of women. Moreover, despite Burton, most discursive constructions of sexual relations between occident and orient were between dominant western males and eastern females, and Scheherazade, insofar as it emphasised the transgressive libidinal desire of women and eroticised the black male, confounded this. Furthermore, the sexually active men in the drama were also feminised by their disguise of

female attire. And, to compound the complexity of the sexual representation still further, Nijinsky, who played the part of Masud, the principal and most potent African male slave, was in real life the lover of Diaghilev (though he later married a fellow dancer and had a child) and as a performer was an object of desire for both women and homosexual men.

Nijinsky was enormously popular perhaps because of the enigma of his appeal. His performance in Scheherazade was described by Benois, one of the creators of the ballet, as 'half cat, half snake, fiendishly feminine and yet wholly terrifying' (Wollen 1987:14) and Garafola has suggested that Nijinsky's projection of sexual heterodoxy was one of the main attractions of the Russian Ballet (1989:323)²⁹. His ambiguous sexuality as heterosexual predator in performance, yet also sexualised object of the male and female gaze, was to place him as a forerunner of 1920s male stars of the cinema, like Valentino (to whom I will return). Meanwhile, as an aside, it is interesting to note that gay-male creations of male sexuality and the eroticised male body --- in this instance Diaghilev's shaping of Nijinsky --- seem to have opened up for women spectators during this period more active and desiring libidinous fantasies. E M Forster's representations of unsatisfactory repressed English men and his more sympathetically drawn English heroines who are attracted to the emotional authenticity and intensity of 'other' 'foreign' masculinities are another parallel instance of homosexual depictions of male-female relations which provide a different way of imagining femininity, sexuality and national identifications.

In fact E M Forster was a regular attender of the ballet, along with Leonard and Virginia Woolf and other major figures of Bloomsbury and the arts and literature. We know that performances in the prewar period also attracted 'society' figures, politicians, foreigners and Jews, financiers and entrepreneurs (Garafola 1989). Among these, no doubt, was Gordon Selfridge. It is inconceivable that he would have celebrated and publicised the company in his mass circulation columns and in his store without also being an enthusiastic member of its audience. That he should promote such a profoundly unconventional --- even iconoclastic --- vision supports the notion of the commercial arena as populariser of cosmopolitan and modernist identifications.

One of the ways in which the oriental imagery of the Ballet circulated in the department stores was through the fashions of the most famous Parisian dress designer of the period, Paul Poiret. Coincidentally, on June 24th 1911, the very day of Selfridge's newspaper missive, Poiret and his wife Denise gave a huge Thousand and Second Night ball in Paris to celebrate his new oriental designs (the extraordinary party and decor are described in detail in Wollen 1987:12). There is some dispute about whether

Poiret's vision of the orient preceded Bakst's --- they were certainly concurrent. Poiret's commercial reach and influence were already well established by the time the Russian Ballet arrived in Paris. Affected by the rational dress movement and Liberty's department store, he had a few years earlier started to 'wage war on the corset' and introduced new dress shapes designed to follow the line of the body (Wollen 1987:10; Adburgham 1975; Wilson 1985) (and as a consequence the American dancer Isadora Duncan was a client of his, Duncan 1928). Poiret was also responsible for introducing into mainstream fashion 'Turkish culottes' or the divided skirt. Now, taking advantage of the success of Scheherazade, he promoted and popularised a more flamboyant oriental look (while continuing to lay siege to the corset) which, at its most theatrical and elaborate, consisted of harem pantaloons and turbans in brilliant greens, purples, crimsons and oranges and heavy gold jewellery, but the style permeated (in varying degrees) a wide range of spheres and social levels. The more conventional variants were like the dress worn by the shopper in Selfridge's Merchandise of the World picture (Figure 3).

Oriental balls became fashionable in London also and perhaps the most celebrated was an Arabian Nights extravaganza held in the autumn of 1911 (Garafola 1989:302), inspired again by Scheherazade and designed to crown Diaghilev's autumn season, but there were dozens of such examples which demonstrated the rippling influence of the ballet in London. Oriental fashions, colours and furnishings were 'the rage' everywhere and transformed the territory of the English female body, house interiors and even the visual landscape of the West End. 'Pale pastel shades which had reigned supreme... for almost two decades were replaced by a riot of barbaric hues --- jade green, purple, every variety of crimson and scarlet, and above all, orange' (Lancaster cited in Adburgham 1975:90). Violet Keppel, daughter of Edward VII's mistress and later lover of Vita Sackville West, was among the young women who decorated their rooms to look like the set of Scheherazade (Souhami 1997:107). Lady Maud Cunard, American heiress, who hated the gloomy traditional decor of her husband's baronial hall in the country, redesigned her house in Cavendish Square in the style of Scheherazade when she moved there to be with her lover, Thomas Beecham in 1911³⁰ (Chisholm 1981:50). 'Colour had universal freedom, even in the department store' Matisse is supposed to have said (Wollen 1987:22), and according to Juliet Duff, a contemporary London patron of the Ballet, 'Harvey Nichols windows blossomed in red and purple' (Buckle 1980:242). Inevitably Selfridges, with the largest and most theatrically composed windows of all the stores, displayed and stocked the full range of oriental merchandise, from carpets to fabrics, gowns to turbans, jewellery to perfumes in the panoply of fashionable colours. Moreover, in such a feverish climate, it would be naive to assume that the popular influence of oriental fashion and the ballet was confined only to questions of colour, texture and style - to the material level. The narratives --- and particularly Scheherazade ---

presented women differently, as subjects as well as objects of sexual desire. They offered another way of imagining a new less constrained more insubordinate femininity³¹, and elements of these narratives will have been present, even if only as allusions, in the store environment. So Selfridge's disposition towards the cosmopolitan and the artistic avantgarde, and his commercial and personal inclination to satisfy his women customers combined in this instance in the promotion and popular dissemination of the oriental mood of the Ballet Russes.

The Tango

Another event that confirmed Selfridge's identification with the exotic and the cosmopolitan was a private costume ball organised by the French Ambassador and a committee of dignitaries, of whom Selfridge was one, to raise money for the French Red Cross. The ball, described in the press as the most original ever held in London, took place in three ballrooms on the top floor and roof garden of the store on July 1st 1913. There were over two thousand guests and the party lasted from 10pm to 5am when breakfast was served. Four thousand lights glittered in the luxurious foliage of the roof garden and the general decor was oriental. Many of the guests wore oriental costumes and danced the tango under the stars to an American rag-time orchestra that played throughout the night (though more conventional waltzes were available on the floor below). Selfridge's archive has many pages of cuttings about the event. It was reported extensively in the British and French press and all of the excited newspaper accounts include references to the tango-dancing.

What did the tango signify in this context? Why did it seem important? Despite its origins in the barrios of Argentina, its early appropriation by some of the fashionable elites of Europe in the early part of the century was not unlike the uptake of the Russian Ballet (Collier et al 1997; Savigliano 1995). Its highpoint was 1912-14 and it continued to be in vogue well into the interwar period. Paris was supposed to have promoted the tango to the rest of the world as it did the Ballet, and similar claims have been made for its significance and influence in relation to fashion, art and a new eroticism for women. In fact it was to be even more influential and more contentious than the Ballet --- partly because its reach was a great deal wider. It very quickly became massively popular across the class spectrum as well as internationally and was in this respect unlike any preceding cultural activity anywhere. Tangomania extended from the aristocracy to the lower middle classes, from St Petersburg to New York and was thus an astonishingly cosmopolitan and modernising force. It was more contentious than the ballet because it involved not only the pleasure of looking --- of being a spectator --- but also body-to-body encounters of an

unprecedented sensuality and intimacy which took place in the public domain. A measure of the controversy that the tango provoked can be deduced from the extensive correspondence in the Times and elsewhere (launched by a critical peeress in May 1913, just six weeks before the Selfridge tango ball) in which it was accused of being lascivious and decadent and, most horrifying of all, of encouraging encounters between young ladies and men who might be of 'American and South American negroid origin' (Collier 1997:83).³² An opponent in France suggested that dancers looked like 'Mohametans ... under the influence of opium' (cited in Savigliano 1995:116). These critics were in turn accused of being old fashioned and reactionary and the dance and its culture defended because it was artistic, exciting, good exercise and of course new. The debate is referred to in a London magazine commenting on the forthcoming Selfridge tango ball: 'a floor below will be reserved for waltzes and old fashioned square dances, so both Box, the ragtimer, and Cox, the negroid hater, should be satisfied'.³³

Commercially, the tango craze spawned a huge ancillary industry (and was thus modern in this sense also) consisting of dance academies, theatre performances, exhibitions, lectures, balls and tango teas, which expanded liminal public space for women in this largely pre-cinema period (as did the department store) and was indeed staffed in part by young male performers and dance-teachers --- tangueros --- from South America, the Caribbean and southern Europe, with whom women from northern European and north American cities were reputed to have sexual liaisons (whence the term Latin Lover) (Collier et al 1997; Savigliano 1995). Rudolph Valentino taught the tango at one such academy in New York before he became a movie star (Botham and Donnelly 1976) and acted the part of a wealthy Argentinian tanguero who has a love affair with a French officer's wife in Paris in The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (1920).³⁴ In Figure 7 we see them dancing at a tango-tea circa 1913.

Central to the new industry were tango fashions. There were special tango dresses with a split or divided skirt to facilitate tango glides; tango hats fitted closely to the head like turbans and had vertical feathers in order to allow partners to dance face to face; there were special tango shoes, tango undergarments, tango jewellery and tango colours (Collier et al 1997; Savigliano 1995). Figure 8 shows a Selfridge advertisement for Tango gowns. The significant factor about these new fashions in the context of the argument that I am making here is the degree to which they overlapped with fashions inspired by the orientalism of the Russian Ballet. These styles of heterogeneous 'other' origin combined in the cosmopolitan cityscapes of the western world and confirmed the move to new body shapes and a new modern consciousness. The tango gowns in Figure 9 were based on designs by Leon Bakst, the creator of the oriental sets and costumes for

Scheherazade. Poiret's oriental harem-culottes were considered ideal fashions for tango dancing and were widely adopted. The tango colours were brilliant reds, yellows and greens, like the colours of Scheherazade. Special tango make-up included 'oriental kohl' for the eyes and dark red lipstick. Tango attitudes included the use of long 'oriental' cigarette holders. The new all-elastic flexible tango corset (called Tango) was a major fashion innovation and, consolidating the influence of Poiret and oriental fashions, led women to abandon steel-boned corsets. As with Sheherazade, the tango offered a model of a more sexually active and wayward femininity. Fashion historian Beatrice Humbert (cited by Savigliano 1995:127) has argued that the tango was the detonator of a new morality, that it promoted the liberation of women and provided them with a venue to exhibit their sensuality in public.

What emerges from this account then, is that the distinctions between the popular appropriations of Diaghilev's production of the orient, and the tango as a condensation of an exoticised Hispanic America, were blurred not only in the public imagination but also in the commercial domain.³⁵ They combined to form a kind of generic popular cosmopolitanism --- a commercial orientalism --- with a distinctive libidinal economy in which women were key players and cultural difference signalled not the abject and the excluded but the modern, the liberating and perhaps even --- though this is more contentious --- the progressive.

The struggle to achieve a measure of personal independence --- to become a 'new woman' --- although carried out in a relatively haphazard and unreflexive manner on the terrain of popular and commercial culture, was not unconnected to the contemporaneous and highly conscious suffrage struggle of the political domain. Both entailed a refusal of compliant gender relations and a rejection of the parental culture and 'tradition'. During the summer of 1911 (on June 17th), within days of the 'invasion' of the Russian Ballet, the largest and most spectacular of all the suffrage demonstrations marched down Oxford Street past Selfridges towards Hyde Park. This was a highpoint of the movement and there were an estimated six or seven miles of marchers and pageants and many thousands of vivid and beautifully executed banners (Tickner 1987). Gordon Selfridge in his column of the following week commented admiringly: 'Last Saturday we saw a sight not easily forgotten... six miles of women intent upon their political status... these women were asking for a voice in legislation' (Selfridge Editorial 21.6.11)³⁶. This example of popular mass action was, paradoxically, increasingly welcomed in the commercial domain in that it was further evidence of the modernising impulse of women consumers and of their aspirations towards economic and political power. (The shop-window smashing campaign was not to occur for another year.) Among the many thousands of marchers on that summer day will have been large numbers of

Selfridge's customers³⁷, members of the audiences of the Russian Ballet, viewers of the Post Impressionist exhibition, tango dancers, dress reformers and Theosophists. There were artists and writers groups and representatives from many parts of the world.³⁸ Annie Besant was certainly there (Tickner 1987:130); so most probably was Emily Lutyens, her fellow Theosophist who, a few weeks earlier had welcomed Krishnamurti at Charing Cross Station on his arrival in London with Besant (Washington 1993:135). Lutyens' sister, Constance Lytton, one of the most famous suffragettes of all, was also there. Feminist protest after the 1911 demonstration became more violent as the government failed to respond, and just two weeks before the Selfridge rooftop tango party, central London witnessed the last great public spectacle of the suffrage campaign: the funeral procession of Emily Wilding Davison, martyr for the cause, to which floral tributes were sent from all over the world (Tickner 1987:138). In their wide social embrace, their deployment of the visual and their forwardlookingness, these marches exemplified not only a modernism of the streets --- a public display of cultural change --- but also, like the tango, a symbolic mapping of an emerging geo-political terrain in which the cityscape of the new woman was increasingly if tangentially linked to a metaphorical abroad with evocations of greater social and sexual freedoms.³⁹

Rudolph Valentino and Desert Romance

The war and the years immediately following it saw major transformations in the position of women, not least as a result of the decimation of the male population, but the prewar focus of this article means that these must mostly remain out of frame. Nonetheless there is one story worth following briefly into the nineteen twenties and the postwar expansion of cinema as popular form, because of the additional light it casts on the relationship between commerce, women and an imaginary abroad. This involves establishing a complex chain of associations (partly by adopting the film theory notion of star-as-auteur) which connects the Selfridge's tango party of 1911 through the international Tangomania of the following decade, to the celebrated performance of Italian-born Hollywood movie star Rudolph Valentino as Argentinian gaucho and tango supremo who introduces the skill and passion of the dance to prewar Paris in The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (1920)⁴⁰ to Valentino as seductive star of the movie The Sheik (1921) to British desert romance fiction and back once more to fantasies about an exotic but indeterminate orient and their commercial invigoration in the department stores.

The movie of The Sheik came out in 1921 and was seen by an estimated one hundred and twenty five million spectators, mainly women,

throughout the cinema going world. The film was based on a novel written by E M Hull during the war while her husband was away at the front and was first published in 1919 (Hull 1996). It was the most successful of the immensely popular genre of erotic literature known as desert or eastern romance, authored mainly by English women for women, with oriental subplots and oriental landscapes in which the prototype heroine was English and the hero a sensual foreigner, usually Arab, Latin or Mediterranean (or at least initially appeared to be so) (Melman 1988)⁴¹. Although the genre had started before the war, it reached its highpoint in the decade immediately afterwards and was linked, as Melman has pointed out, to the emergence of the flapper --- 'the new type of woman: politically emancipated, economically independent and sexually uninhibited' (Melman 1988:89-90) who inhabited a traumatised and rapidly changing postwar world in which masculinity was indeed in crisis. In this context the term 'sheik' epitomised in the western imagination, the absent virile lover.

Valentino, as star of the Hollywood version of The Sheik, successfully delivered the promise of the novel albeit in a contradictory fashion. He was powerful, magnetic and passionate with an exciting physical presence, yet his sexuality was ambiguous. Like Nijinsky he wore make up, slave bracelets and rather feminine clothes --- in his case white flowing robes, baggy trousers, sashes and embroidered waistcoats (see Figure 10). The novel The Sheik, which preceded the film, contains vivid descriptions of the heroine's appreciation of the hero's body --- of the pleasure of looking: 'He had flung aside the heavy cloak that enveloped him... and was standing before her, tall and broad shouldered... Diana's eyes passed over him slowly' (Hull 1996:48). The casting of the male hero as erotic object of the female gaze in the novel was repeated and made more complex in the films in which Valentino, as performer and dancer as well as lover, was rendered the scopic object of both the camera and a mass female audience (Hansen 1991:263). This subtle feminisation proved immensely popular and again tells us something about the complex ways in which women's desire for men seemed to increase as the polarisation of gendered attributes diminished. But Valentino's appeal⁴² was based on more than just his heterodox masculinity. Like Nijinsky in Scheherazade (and the tangueros in the dance academies of Paris and London) he was also an imaginary other - dark, intriguing, soulful and hot-blooded; his own southern European appearance disguised always as something yet more exotic and remote (Hansen 1991). His seductiveness, which was not confined to the US and extended to Britain also, resided above all in his subversive difference.⁴³

The association of Valentino with both Argentinian tango and Middle Eastern desert echoes the confluence between oriental and tango fashions of the prewar period. Again we see a generic eastern-Latin figure. And again women are positioned differently: as spectators; as consumers of the visual;

sometimes as sexual initiators; and as unfulfilled in their allotted lives. Again we can make the link back to consumption, because as before, these films and fictions spawned a huge new industry of ancillary consumer products: records, fashions, accessories, furnishings, and jewellery (for men as well as women) which offered a fantasy of sexual adventure and travel to distant places, which became all the craze, and which of course were also stocked by Selfridges for its women consumers.

In conclusion

I want to argue first for the specificity of the orientalism of the commercial domain. Unlike the orientalism of colonial domination and scientific and anthropological discourses -whose purpose and operations serve to maintain cultural and racial distance - commercial discourses, just because of their embeddedness in the market economy, narrate an abroad which is enticing (but not too strange). Market considerations --- the commercial imperatives of selling --- ensure that commodities with foreign associations succeed only if cultural difference is produced as attractive. Denigration will not promote sales. In this sense therefore, commercial narratives are related to the more positive --- if still ambiguous --- representations of contemporary avant-garde and popular cultural formations like the Ballets Russes and the tango. And so we return to Gordon Selfridge's cosmopolitanism, to his anti-insular transnational and utopian vision in which cultural difference is promoted, appreciated and even desired. Although his vision is associated with commercial considerations and was in part a response to existing taste formations, it would be unjust to him and a misinterpretation of the conjuncture to reduce his cosmopolitanism merely to the imperatives of the market.

The cosmopolitanism I have been looking at is part of a broader modernist formation, rooted in the restlessness of turn-of-the-century migration and diasporic culture, itself a consequence of, on the one hand, exclusion and exile, and on the other, the allure of the city and the new, and associated with transnational identifications and the sense of not belonging anywhere. This is the geo-political terrain --- as Raymond Williams (1989) and others have pointed out --- from which emerge the metropolitan cultural imaginings and new knowledges of emigre modernist art, literature and politics (which include a fascination with difference and the primitive, Torgovnick 1990). This modernism is part of a cosmopolitan revolt against tradition and the academy, it is about the destabilisation and transcendence of national identities and borders as well as those of artistic form. What I want to argue here is that the ideals and impetus of cosmopolitanism are not confined to the intelligentsia and the critics of bourgeois society (and in this respect I disagree with Wollen 1994). During the period that I describe,

cosmopolitanism is absorbed into mainstream department store culture --- into the realm of commercial and popular modernism. But cosmopolitanism does not entirely lose its critical edge in this new habitus. Like modernism it is part of the movement against the conventions of certain sectors of Victorian and Edwardian Britain --- the imperialism, snobbery, traditional hierarchies and narrow nationalisms --- from which Gordon Selfridge, the self-made modernising American businessman and immigrant to Britain, is himself both overtly and subtly marginalised in his life in London. It may appear paradoxical, yet it is logical, that the dissemination of popular cosmopolitanism should occur through the networks of commercial capitalism for another reason as well. Like the cinema, whose highpoint was to follow the period that I have been looking at, department stores and the manufacturers of mass produced fashions were uniquely obliged to be sensitive to the taste of the consumer.

And indeed it was one of Selfridges great commercial strengths that he recognised the power and authority of the consumer. Moreover, he was fully aware that his consumers were nearly always female: 'Three quarters of the store exists to meet the needs of women' (Selfridge Editorial 6.7.11) and 'It is the woman customer who is responsible (indirectly) for the taste and distinction of our merchandise. She may not realise the influence she has on production' (Selfridge Editorial 20.10.11) he stated unequivocally in his columns. Thus the other extraordinary and defining element in the world of consumption which marks it out so distinctively and is so important here, is that women are addressed as subjects. In this it anticipates the relations of spectator to screen, as we saw in the discussion of Valentino. Women therefore, in their capacity as mediators between narratives of cultural difference and the market, occupy a remarkably strategic location in the formation of a commercial cosmopolitanism as well as more generally in the consolidation of twentieth century consumer culture. This is a position which challenges the notion of the domination of a phallogocentric discourse and sits uneasily with the postcolonial thesis which argues that the occidental fascination with the 'east' is structured like the desire of a man for a woman. Yet the critical picture that I am outlining also contains a paradox: the consolidation of women's authority in the market place and the increased value (and commodification) of cultural difference as depicted here are likely to have been achieved, at least in part, at the cost of feminising the oriental or other man. This contradiction notwithstanding, the appeal of cultural difference --- and the different masculinity inscribed therein --- can also be read as a victory for the colonised or excluded male in his contest with the (white) coloniser.⁴⁴

Part of the distinctiveness of the commercial formation that I have been describing is a consequence of the intimacy of the domains and levels which link the woman consumer to cultural difference. 'Other' cultural

products not only make an impact on English taste formations during this period but are increasingly introduced into the private domestic sphere - into the sanctity of the home. Moreover, oriental and foreign fashions and fabrics adorn the person, and like the abandoned corset and the fantasy of an 'other' lover, reinvent the body. This very physical encounter --- fuelled in part by English female subjectivity and desire and the sexual and political discourses of the moment --- disrupts the anthropological distance of scientific observation and the museum culture, of the 'other world' as exhibition. Those more polarised representations, organised and orchestrated by scientists and administrators, are not obliged to take into account the response of the women consumer. What I describe here then, is an emergent formation, linked to the narratives of difference in dance and theatre, in which boundaries are not so rigidly maintained and in which the intricate processes of what Robert Young has referred to as 'fusion' (1995:5) are produced through an odd alliance between store owners, as modernisers and popularisers, and women consumers.

This goes against the grain of much postcolonial⁴⁵ criticism of the last decades which has focused on the way in which 'orientalism', through its imagined orient, has contributed to the management, exploitation and domination of others and had as its main preoccupations or starting points the injuries perpetrated by racial discourse. While this body of work has been of enormous political and cultural value, my intention here has been different. What I have tried to do is draw attention to the more ambiguous, utopian and perhaps even emancipatory formulations of the commercial uptake and reworking of transnational culture; to the specific meanings and varying contexts of cosmopolitanism, exoticism, and orientalism. These undermine the binary constructions of the colonised and coloniser which exist in much critical work on imperialism and race (as Young has also argued 1995)⁴⁶. Academic writing has tended to condemn western fascination with difference (where it is addressed at all) as inevitably exploitative and voyeuristic.⁴⁷ Kobena Mercer is an important exception here, who in the revised version of his article on Mapplethorpe, 'Reading Racial Fetishism - Part 2', withdraws his criticisms of 'erotic objectification' and 'aestheticisation of racial difference', and argues that what counts is history, authorship and context; fetishism is not necessarily a 'bad thing', especially insofar as it involves shifting attention onto the instability of whiteness (Mercer 1994:190). Furthermore, as Kajri Jain has pointed out in relation to a different object, the intellectual denigration of the fetish and fetishism is a peculiarly western phenomenon of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁴⁸

Part of the project of this article has indeed been to refocus the investigating eye onto the instability of whiteness. My argument has been that the interest of occidental women in a metaphorical orient, their

fascination with imagined other people and places --- whether geographically located in Persia, Russia, Africa or Argentina --- must also be understood as a form of reaction against the politics and emotional customs of the moment, as a half-conscious identification with other subalterns, and, moreover, as a sign of the precariousness of Englishness and English masculinity. The conjuncture I have described is one in which Britain's Empire was showing increasing signs of fissure and yet (or perhaps, therefore) colonial relationships with racial others were fraught with prohibitions. At the same time, a modernist cosmopolitan impulse --- which rejected the social and emotional constraints of English traditionalism and embraced foreign travel, modes of living and cultural forms --- was increasingly popularised through commerce and the cinema. This period was, furthermore, the highpoint of a profoundly confrontational feminism. Thus the allure of a culturally repudiated other of the kind described in this article can also be interpreted as part of a wider revolt against the parental culture and the symbolic control of the father.⁴⁹ The constellation of contingent fantasies about escape and renewal reveal as much about the insufficiency as the supremacy of the west. They tell us something about the pervasive experience of lack and enclosure in everyday life and they cast light on the complex dynamic of the internal psychic world and the enigmatic processes of projection on to, and identification with, difference. Desire for the other, for something different, is also about the desire for merger with the other, about the desire to become different. Stuart Hall has several times referred tantalisingly, but all too fleetingly, to the complex interrelationship of racism and desire. He has suggested that racism emerges from the denial of the desire for difference, that disavowal of desire for the other lies at the heart of racism.⁵⁰ I hope here to have added some historical substance to this important thesis.

Notes

¹ For a discussion of how modernity has been theorised and periodised, see O'Shea (1996). For its relation to women, consumption and the department store see, Nava (1995 and 1996).

² In the early years the store was in fact called Selfridge's (with an apostrophe) but here I use the later version to distinguish between the store and its owner.

³ 104 full-page advertisements were placed in eighteen national newspapers at a cost of £36,000 (Honeycombe 1984:12).

⁴ The Star 29.3.09

⁵ This has been discussed in a number of recent histories. See eg Abelson (1989), Bowlby (1985), Leach (1984) and Nava (1996).

⁶ For instance he provided pension schemes and recreational facilities. In 1910 staff activities included the production of a play called The Suffrage Girl (Daily Sketch 3.12.10)

⁷ For instance in 1909 the 'Bleriot monoplane', the first to cross the channel, was rescued by Selfridge from the Dover cliffs and put on exhibition on the ground floor and the store kept open till midnight for the many thousands who wished to see it.

⁸ The columns were issued from Selfridge and Co. Ltd. (Editorial Rooms) between 1909 to 1939. Although often written by professional writers, they were based on Selfridge's drafts or ideas.

⁹ These are held, along with much other material, in the Selfridges archive. Very many thanks to Fred Redding, the archivist, for his generous and knowledgeable support of my research..

¹⁰ For discussion about the invention of tradition and empire see Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) and Schwarz (1987).

¹¹ Frank Woolworth, another famous American retailing entrepreneur, was concerned about the lack of confidence in Selfridge's methods: 'Many Englishmen think he will fail. There seems to be a prejudice against him' (Honeycombe 1984:37). Selfridge was not to acquire British citizenship until 1937 after the coronation of George VI and increasingly extravagant displays of support for the monarchy, despite a much earlier application. The parallels with Mohamed Al Fayed are striking: Fayed, Egyptian owner of the store Harrods since the mid nineteen eighties (and father of Dodi) has twice been refused British citizenship.

¹² For an earlier version of this paper presented at the Imperial Cities Conference at Royal Holloway University of London, 2-3 May 1997, I searched unsuccessfully in the Selfridge archive for some evidence of support for Empire during this critical period. All I could find were token celebrations of Empire Day conducted on behalf of staff. Selfridge was not involved in these. Imperial themes in the store seem to have emerged only much later, in the mid thirties. However, although not interested in Empire, Selfridge engaged enthusiastically in the rituals of monarchy-adulation, but the spectacular decors created for the funeral of Edward VII in 1910 and the coronation of George V in 1911 were considered by competitors undignified and excessive: for the funeral the whole store was shrouded in black crepe; for the coronation it was covered in heraldic shields, medallions, portcullises and lit up by 5,000 lights (Honeycombe 1984:41).

¹³ I have not been able to discover whether he knew the American millionairess, Mabel Dodge, also resident in London at the time and an active member and financial supporter of the Theosophy movement which was fashionable and also in some respects deliberately oppositional. One of its leaders, Annie Besant, was a socialist and fighter for Indian Home Rule, and with the support of Mabel Dodge and Emily Lutyens brought to Europe from India the young Krishnamurti who subsequently became the most influential guru of the century. Fabians, internationalists and pacifists were also linked to the movement at different points (Washington 1996).

¹⁴ A further aspect of his cosmopolitan practice - and also a productive commercial strategy - was to advertise the store as a 'haven for foreign travelers', 'a home away from home' and provide foreign

visitors with specially designated rest rooms (there were French, German, American and Colonial Lounges). This was not the practice of competing stores.

¹⁵ The text below the image is explored in Nava (1996:72 and 76).

¹⁶ See for instance Coombes (1994) Lowe (1991) Melman (1995) Sharafuddin (1994) and Young (1991).

¹⁷ Coombes cites the interesting case of merchant James Pinnock whose progressive views about African customs were based on thirty five years of trade and contrast markedly with imperial, anthropological and Christian beliefs of the period (1994:29).

¹⁸ Sara Mills, in relation to the Indian context, has drawn attention to the way in which, in the colonial domestic space, colonials could be on display to as many as twenty servants, so the private sphere was lived publicly and Englishness performed (paper given at the Imperial Cities Conference, Royal Holloway University of London, May 2-3 1997).

¹⁹ 1911 is the year that Joseph Conrad published his novel Under Western Eyes in which Russia is constructed as the East and the emotional expressiveness of the Russians is contrasted with the constraint of the English.

²⁰ As with the Post-Impressionists exhibition there also detractors, though perhaps not as vociferous.

²¹ When Selfridges opened in 1909 the new Information Bureau received more inquiries about where Maud Allan was dancing than anything else (Honeycombe 1984:12).

²² Though, as Lucy Bland has pointed out to me, it does seem to have echoed Maud Allan's, whose Vision of Salome dance was also erotic and bloodthirsty.

²³ Matisse and Picasso were among the painters who acknowledged their indebtedness.

²⁴ The choreography was by Michel Folkine and the music by Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov.

²⁵ Devised by Folkine, Bakst and Alexandre Benois. My synopsis is based on Buckle's account (1980) and the 1997 performance by the Kirov Ballet (at the Coliseum, London), intended to be a re-creation of the original.

²⁶ Burton's 'literal' translation was first published in ten volumes between 1884-6. The full unabridged version was printed only in a limited edition and remains to this day on the restricted shelves of the British Library.

²⁷ The 1997 Kirov production in London (which claimed to reproduce the original design and choreography) deleted this visual coding: the slaves were the same colour as the women of the harem.

²⁸ There have been many translations of these famous tales. Burton's elaborate Victorian translation with its notorious introductory notes and terminal essay differs considerably from

others, and most recently from Haddawy's. For an evaluation and history of the different translations see Haddawy's Introduction (1992). Burton's own comments, his terminal essay, which is mainly an anthropological analysis of 'pederasty' throughout the world, his life as an explorer, consul and scholar and his identification with the orient are all relevant to the discussion in this article but there is regrettably no space to do them justice.

²⁹ Ottoline Morrell was a great fan of his and Keynes admitted to finding him attractive and admiring his legs (though he too later married one of the ballerinas from the company). Among the early critics of the Ballet were Roger Fry and Wyndham Lewis (Garafola 1989: Chapter 11).

³⁰ Lady Cunard was mother of Nancy Cunard who was to become famous in the thirties partly for her promotion of Afro-American art and the 'Negro cause'. Beecham's orchestra played for the Russian Ballet on their 1911 visit.

³¹ Vita Sackville West, after having seen Scheherazade twice in one week with her lover Violet Keppel (later Trefusis), browned her face, put on men's clothes and a turban and attired thus, with a lighted cigarette in her hand, walked with Violet down Piccadilly to Charing Cross from where they took a train to Orpington (Souhami 1997:140).

³² This was also when Jack Johnson, black heavyweight champion from Texas, arrived in England and was made welcome by white women (cited in Schwarz 1996:201).

³³ From London Opinion 21st June 1913, Selfridges Archive press book.

³⁴ In Sally Potter's 1997 film The Tango Lesson the English heroine has private lessons with three Argentinian tangueros at once, of whom one is her lover.

³⁵ The overlap was symbolically represented in Ken Russell's biopic Valentino in a fictitious scene in which Valentino teaches Nijinsky to dance the tango. I have found no evidence that this encounter really took place.

³⁶ Selfridge is referring to proposed consumer legislation.

³⁷ Selfridges stocked cloaks and scarves in the suffrage colours and other associated memorabilia in support of the struggle.

³⁸ Some of the same tensions between patriots and supporters of Empire on the one hand and internationalists and cosmopolitans on the other are discernible within the suffrage movement (Tickner 1987).

³⁹ See Fussell's account (1980), though as Light has pointed out (1991), this focuses on the experience of men.

⁴⁰ This film is a moving account of the futility of war and the arbitrariness of national identifications. Valentino, who is indeed wonderfully alluring, even to the late twentieth century eye, is killed fighting for the French in the mud fields of battle face-to-face with his German cousin.

⁴¹ The genre was much disapproved of by D H Lawrence and the Leavises who called it 'petty pornography for typists' yet Lawrence himself was fascinated by 'otherness' and his own work, in which the emotional and sexual frigidity of the English - particularly the upper-classes - is counterposed to the passion and authenticity of people from the south, could be read as a more sophisticated variant of this genre.

⁴² During the week after his death, an estimated fifty thousand mourners, mainly women, were supposed to have filed past his coffin each day (Botham and Donnelly 1976).

⁴³ Washington, in his book about Theosophy, has suggested that Krishnamurti, whose sexuality was also ambiguous and who of course was also racially 'other', became a similar but less vulgar kind of movie star for the many thousands of European and north American Theosophists in the early twenties (1996:211).

⁴⁴ This was argued by, among others, male Black Power activists in the US in the 1960s.

⁴⁵ This is a problematic term and I use it loosely to refer to work on the history of colonisation and racial exclusion. There is no catch-all term equivalent to feminism which signals both focus and debate that can be deployed here.

⁴⁶ Homi Bhabha's dense and classic essay 'The Other Question' (1994) does not fall into this category, yet it operates in a register which I found I could not make use of in this article.

⁴⁷ Martha Savigliano's book on the tango, which I have drawn on for this article, is an example of this. For instance she argues that "'exotic" objects have been constituted by applying a homogenizing practice of exoticization, a system of exotic representation that commoditized the colonials in order to suit imperial consumption.' (1995:2) and 'exoticism [is]... part of a display of imperial power among nationalities disputing hegemony at the core' (1995:6). The tango is an aspect of this exploitative exoticisation. See also Anoop Nayak's article on Haagen-Dazs advertising which offers a more complex reading of the 'exotic' but one still predicated on the notion of exploitation and the perpetuation of power relations (1997).

⁴⁸ 'When the Gods go to Market: the ritual Management of Desire in Indian Bazaar Art', paper presented at the Objects of Belonging Conference, University of Western Sydney, Australia, 10-11 October 1997.

⁴⁹ Some of these points are developed by Karen Brooks in 'The Lotus Eaters: Consumption, Desire and Expatriation' in which she analyses the dynamic of expatriation in relation to both Oedipal revolt and Lacanian desire for completion; paper presented at the Objects of Belonging Conference, University of Western Sydney, Australia, 10-11 October 1997.

⁵⁰ See for example Hall (1992:225) and in the film Frantz Fanon, dir. Isaac Julien (1997).

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Figures

1. 'All nationalities meet at Selfridge's and all are welcome'. Advertisement from the Selfridge launch campaign in 1909. Selfridges Archive.
2. 'Merchandise of the World' from Selfridges 5th Anniversary book The Spirit of Modern Commerce (1914). Selfridges Archive.
3. 'Where East Meets West' from Selfridges 5th Anniversary book The Spirit of Modern Commerce (1914). Selfridges Archive.
4. Scheherazade costume designs by Leon Bakst for the blue sultana and the diamond negro.
5. Scheherazade orgy scene from 1910 performance in Paris. The dancers performing the slaves were blacked up. Vaslev Nijinsky is on the right and the favourite wife (performed by Ida Rubinstein) on the left. St Petersburg State Museum of Theatre and Art.
6. Bakst's design for Masud, the golden negro, performed by Nijinsky.
7. Valentino as Julio in Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse dancing the tango with his mistress in Paris c.1913. BFI Stills Library.
8. Tango gowns at Selfridges. Part of a full-page advertisement in The Daily Telegraph November 1913. Selfridges Archive
9. Fashions executed by Paquin based on designs by Bakst c.1913. Victoria and Albert Museum.
10. Valentino in The Sheik. BFI Stills Library.