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Electronic version
URL: http://journals.openedition.org/ebc/3401
DOI: 10.4000/ebc.3401
ISSN: 2271-5444

Publisher
Presses universitaires de la Méditerranée

Electronic reference
Valérie Morisson, « Yinka Shonibare, MBE and Sartorial Parody: Costuming as Subversive Practice », Études britanniques contemporaines [Online], 51 | 2016, Online since 01 December 2016, connection on 02 May 2019. URL : http://journals.openedition.org/ebc/3401 ; DOI : 10.4000/ebc.3401

This text was automatically generated on 2 May 2019.
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Valérie Morisson

1 Yinka Shonibare’s sense of humour and critical playfulness has earned him many acclaims. Associated with the Young British Artists and a Royal Academician, he was nominated for the Gordon Turner Prize in 2004, was made a Member of the British Empire in 2005, and has received many public commissions in England and abroad over the last decade. Spiced up with postmodern humour, his artworks are as jokingly seducing as thought-provoking. If ‘humour has been central to the cultural politics of movements such as Dada, Surrealism, Situationism, Fluxus, Performance and Feminism, and of course much recent art practice that defies categorisation’ (Higgie 11), it pervades postmodern and postcolonial art. The humour permeating these art practices is often subversive for it aims to ‘disrupt our assumptions and patterns of thinking’ (Klein 137), which is exactly what Shonibare’s works do. The artist explores a wide range of comic genres and art forms to address issues of cultural displacement, power relations and gender. Noteworthy is the double-sidedness of his works. Shonibare claims that his work is more poetic than political ‘because it’s trying to put different layers at the same time in the same space’ (Müller 13). Equivocity is indeed crucial to his artistic proposal and stems largely from his use of costumes cut in wax fabric and elaborated with famous costumiers, like Dee Sheehan.

2 Shonibare’s taste for textile maps a twofold artistic lineage. The artist is conversant with feminist art which, in the 1970s, reintroduced textile and crafts in high-art and underscored the invisibility of women and minority artists. The use of textile and needlework in 20th-century art, which is not restricted to female artists, aimed at questioning the relation between art and crafts, local traditions and cultural
globalisation; it also put to the fore complex debates over the gender or ethnic bias in art practices and made art history collide with anthropology (Dupont, preface). Textile is central in the African visual culture that Shonibare, born in Nigeria, evokes in his works. The patterned wax fabrics designed by the Dutch company Vlisco or by Ghana-based Akosombo Textile Limited (ATL) have long been identity-markers. Wax fabric is extensively used in African postcolonial art: both Seydou Keïta’s and Malick Sibidé’s photographs draw attention to the patterns of the fabric, Grace Ndiritu, El Anatsui, Mary Sibande and other contemporary artists use wax fabric. A Malian-born fashion designer has recently created the Xuly Bët fashion which revisits African textiles.

Textile, as shall be showed subsequently, is more than a material, it is a cultural item loaded with meanings and deeply connected to identity construction, hence its use in postcolonial art. Shonibare’s double heritage accounts for his use of fabric as a vehicle for artistic, social, political and ideological critique. Like other contemporary artists, he uses the traditions of masquerading and costuming to probe identity construction in our postmodern and postcolonial epoch. After emphasising Shonibare’s use of pastiche in a postmodern fashion, this paper will dwell upon the satirical features of his works and the postcolonial dimension of his output.

Costuming, cultural appropriation and reempowerement

There is a long tradition of masquerading and costuming in painting and lens-based arts: many artists have portrayed themselves in period costumes; fantasy photographs of people in a wide variety of attire were extremely popular throughout the 19th century; contemporary self-portraits often resort to masquerade (Bright 99). As postmodernism explores the issue of authenticity and uniqueness through parody, it is hardly surprising to see that this costuming tradition has been revitalised for critical purposes. Costuming is subversive and therefore more akin to parody, as defined by Linda Hutcheon, than pastiche. While Gérard Genette views parody as playful, Hutcheon claims that modern artists have resorted to parody to ‘refunction’ the form to their own needs (Hutcheon 4) and argues that parody is repetition with critical distance, which marks difference rather than similarity (Hutcheon 6). The parodistic dimension of postmodernism is profoundly revisionist, it celebrates the loss of certainty and displays a ‘seditious adherence to doubt’ (Gutleben 11). The use of costume as disguise introduces doubt and uncertainty in the sphere of identity, in other words, it inserts postmodern doubt and fragmentation within the self.

In the late 1970s, Cindy Sherman, who has exerted a strong influence on Shonibare, renewed the masquerade tradition by embodying female actresses (Untitled Film Stills series, 1977–1980) to question the clichés of femininity. In her History Portraits (1989–1990), made up of 35 large colour photographs pastiching European history paintings, the artist staged herself in period costumes with props and prosthetics. Her uncanny photographic performances aimed at criticising the allegorisation of the female body in academic painting and the objectification of femininity. The art of masquerading, visible in her compositions, turned identity into role-playing so that selfhood was negated. Sherman’s work also exposed the threat posed to the integrity of the body, a theme which surfaces in some works by Shonibare, a disabled artist, notably in The Age of Enlightenment
and works featuring headless mannequins. Sherman’s critical use of costumes has inspired young contemporary artists from non-Western origins but trained in London such as Yasumasa Morimura and Chan-Hyo Bae (Existing in Costume, 2005–2012) whose works rely on masquerade. Both artists impersonate male and female models or artists in reconstructed scenes and faked masterpieces, using costumes and make-up which uncannily disguise their Asian features. Their apparatuses define identity as staged performance and question the hegemony of Western art history while costuming materialises cultural and estrangement and hybridity. Like Sherman and Morimura, Shonibare has revisited several iconic paintings, such as Thomas Gainsborough’s Mr and Mrs Andrews (National Portrait Gallery, 1750), Jean-Honoré Fragonard’s The Swing (Wallace Collection, London, 1767) and used costuming as a vehicle for critique. The dark-skinned figures in his parodistic compositions are dressed in wax fabric period costumes. Both Morimura and Shonibare have pastiched Caravaggio’s Medusa (1597, Uffizi, Florence). Shonibare’s use of a dark-skinned model and African wax fabric for the hair of the monster introduces a discrepancy which is comical yet critical in so far as the transformation challenges the hegemony of Western archetypes and tropes. While this parody paradoxically reasserts the universal centrality of the myth, the africanisation of the threatening monster makes the figure of Medusa intersect with of the African sorceress and the exotic savage. Morimura’s and Chan-Hyo Bae’s disruptive embodiments of Western figures in iconic masterpieces, as well as Shonibare’s batik-based reconstitutions of easel paintings challenge what the Nigerian art critic Okwui Enwesor calls ‘westernism’ (Enwesor 2002a), 46). Costumes and costuming enable them to appropriate an artistic tradition that was foreign to them. Postmodern pastiche gives way to postcolonial parody: while postmodernism deconstructs the grand narratives, postcolonialism replaces these grand narratives with new ethical demands on modes of historical interpretation (Enwesor 2002a, 45), it lays claim to the modern metropolitan world by making the colonial ‘other’ visible. In Shonibare’s works, the costumes acquire an acute signification given that ‘when the characters utter no sounds, their clothes obviously speak more loudly’ (Hollander 237) and replace the colonised in the centre of the historical stage.

6 In Addio del Passato (James Cohan Gallery, 2012), postmodern pastiche and postcolonial parody are enmeshed. The installation comprises a series of photographs entitled Fake Death Pictures, a video and sex objects displayed in window cases. The work is imbued with postmodern humour and exposes art as artifice. Artificiality is enhanced by the contrasts in lighting in the photographs as well as by the exaggerated pathos of the gestures of the protagonists and the actress who sings the aria from the last act of Verdi’s La Traviata. The source of the parody is twofold as the works allude to formulaic academic painting and the tableaux-vivants, a form of entertainment which was the preserve of an educated elite in the 18th century and which was directly inspired from well-known masterpieces (Bajac, Holmström). Requiring elaborate stage effects and costumes, the tableaux vivants tapped into a repertoire of gestures which distanced art from life. Addio del passato illustrates to perfection the postmodern use of simulacra, and its ‘deluge of irony, cynicism and detached enjoyment’ (Matthews 1). The humorous reconstitutions harbor a serious indictment as the images of suicide echo the contemporary decline of Western hegemony in times of economic crisis. Besides, the installation is subtly keyed to colonial history and should be read from a postcolonial perspective too. The actress and the characters in the photographs are dressed in elaborate batik period costume and wig while the sex objects are upholstered with wax-fabric. The African actress impersonates...
Frances Nisbet, Lord Nelson’s betrayed wife. The story of the Admiral’s infidelity offers a counter-vision of the national hero while the African identity of the actress is a reminder of the colonial history of Britain. The incongruity of the costumed black figures produces a comic effect. Inconsistency has been widely identified as provoking laughter (Defays, Holm): comedy may be defined as ‘a sustained encounter between two opposed realities’, or the juxtaposition of impossibilities to subversive effect (Zupančič in Matthews 20). Wax fabric is consistently used to make the former invisible other visible and to remind us that colonial wealth often stemmed from the exploitation of indigenous people. In the three sculptures, echoing surrealist inventions, erotic fantasies are keyed to exoticism. Anti-Hysteria Device (an elaborate mechanism which activates a metallic penis upholstered with batik), Anti-Masturbation Device and Fetish Boots are displayed as precious artefacts, which makes the objects all the more comical. However, owing to the use of wax fabric as a symbol of Africanness, these objects evoke the sexual harassment of black servants at the time of colonial empires and the hypocrisy surrounding the desire for exotic bodies. Shonibare’s criticism hinges on various apparatuses. Indeed, by creating installations rather than autonomous artworks, he elaborates curatorial strategies serving his message and redresses the asymmetry between curating cultures—the Western institutions exhibiting colonial artefacts—and curated cultures—indigenous cultures which are exhibited without being able to control their own image (Mosquera 133–39). The artist’s reappropriation strategy is therefore multiple.

In Shonibare’s works, the fabric is a complex material: its gaudy colours and geometric patterns offer counterpoints to Western art, whether it be the decorative motifs of Victorian hangings (Victorian Philanthropist’s parlour, 1996–97) or the abstract shapes of modern art (Double Dutch, 1994 or Black Gold, 2006). The fabric equally conveys political messages. Though Shonibare often finds his inspiration in history—the Enlightenment, the pre-revolutionary periods and the Victorian era, he shuns exoticism and nostalgia to tie past injustices to contemporary social issues. In Victorian Philanthropist’s parlour, the cheap wax fabric used for the parlour is decorated with the anachronistic figure of a black football player and logos of luxury brands. The fabric acts as a reminder that much wealth was derived from the exploitation of the colonies however, the modern patterns draw attention to greediness regardless of race and times.

Shonibare’s politicisation of aesthetics or his aestheticisation of politics rely on humour. His postmodern humour is undoubtedly shaped by that of the native trickster, who ‘is admired for being creative, curious, playful, irreverent and resilient and is used to teach about social etiquette, customs and ways of being in the world’ (Ryan 76). Lewis Hyde defines the trickster as the one who disrupts and reshapes the world around him, the ‘mythic embodiment of ambiguity and ambivalence, doubleness and duplicity, contradiction and paradox’ (Hyde 7). Shonibare’s incongruous combinations of wax-fabric and Western period costumes create comical visual oxymora. His tongue-in-cheek humour is redolent of the works of African artists Chéri Chérin or Shéri Samba who fiercely criticise corruption or political hypocrisy. Humour and political critique go hand in hand in Shonibare’s Scramble for Africa (commissioned for the Museum of African Art, Long Island City, New York). Shonibare entitles the installation after the famous historical phrase coined by the British in 1884 to refer to the Berlin treaty (1884–1885) organised by European heads of states (here headless) to ratify the division of Africa between the competing colonial powers. The fourteen mannequins gathered around a
table are comically gesticulating as if performing on stage. The wax fabric replaces the colonised at the heart of a history from which he was excluded, absent and obliterated.

From sartorial parody to carnivalesque satire

Shonibare’s works verge on satire, which Northrop Frye famously defined as ‘militant irony’ spiced up with tokens of fantasy and the grotesque⁹ (Frye 224). As the artist himself explains,

I entertain the audience, I seduce, and then I provoke them [the spectators] into thinking. [...]. But at the same time, underneath that process, there is something more troubling. As an artist, it remains always important for me that the audience can engage both intellectually and aesthetically with the work of art. (Müller 25)

In *A Garden for Love*, an installation made up of four sculptural groups parodying Fragonard’s roccoco paintings, as well as in another more explicit series of sculptures entitled *Gallantry and Criminal Conversation*, Shonibare tackles the issue of race and sexuality: ‘what I am really doing is showing very wealthy Europeans in very wealthy clothes, but because I changed their clothes into African textiles, I give an indication that the luxury that they enjoy, the labour of the making of the clothes is supplied by others who are less fortunate’ (Müller 12). In *The Swing*—a parody of *The Progress of Love* by Fragonard—sexuality is evoked through the phallus-like shape of the branch overhanging the scene and the splayed legs of the woman. The notion of excess, illustrated by roccoco art, takes on a satirical meaning. ‘Excess, the artist notes, is the only legitimate means of subversion... Hybridisation is a form of disobedience, a parasitic disobedience on the host of the species, an excessive form of libido, it is joyful sex’ (Hobbs 34). In *A Garden for Love* and *Gallantry and Criminal Conversation* humour seems to be what contains the chaos looming large in strictly hierarchised cultures. In Latin, satire means ‘mixture’ or ‘medley’ so that it is related to miscellany and liminality: it functions in a space between the law and transgression. Within this framework, satire disrupts order and classifications, it denies hierarchies and closure (Matthews 13–16). The hybrid figure of the satyr epitomises lawlessness and unexpressed sexuality. In *Gallantry and Criminal Conversation*, the brutal sexuality of the coloniser is aestheticised so as to bring the decorous and the obscene into a sustainable juxtaposition. The beautification of the obscene in satirical works ‘is akin to a sublimation process protecting the subject against the wild aggressive drive of the satyr’ (Matthews 28). The archaic sexuality partly disclosed in the satyr/satire has often been attributed to ‘primitive’ people yet here, the ‘civilised’ have an archaic uncontrolled sexuality. It is worth noting that *A Garden for Love* was conceived for the Musée du Quai Branly so that the idea of exhibiting savage or primitive impulses operates in a specific context (Müller).

In the two works, the lightness of the scenes contrasts with the absence of heads. As is the case in carnivals, sexuality and death blend in a disturbing manner. The headless mannequins are a reference to the beheading of aristocrats during the Revolution. Fragonard was commissioned *The Progress of Love* for Madame du Barry, who had extravagant tastes in dress and who was subsequently beheaded. The artist draws a parallel between the pre-revolutionary era and the tensions nowadays teeming under the illusion of Western comfort: ‘we have to readdress the unfortunate ones’, he states (Müller 17). Headlessness may also be analysed as a means of destabilising identity construction and focusing attention on poses, gestures, and costumes (Lamoureux 54).
Besides, by deleting the heads, and therefore any facial feature that may betray temperament, Shonibare imposes a collective rather than individual approach to issues of class or ethnic identity. Robert Hobbs contends that the absence of head in many of Shonibare’s works find its source in Acéphale, a surrealist magazine directed by George Bataille and advocating anarchy and irreverence. We shall attempt to give another interpretation for headlessness, one connected to postcolonialism.

Addressing postcolonial hybridity: Shonibare’s costumes as translation

Parody as a strategy of reappropriation is a key feature of postcolonial art. Artists from India or Indian origins (Pushpamala n. from India, Annu Palakunnathu Matthew), from Africa (Malik Sidibé, Seydou Keïta, Grace Ndiritu) or Eastern countries (Shadi Ghadirian) conceive works which critically echo the photographic representations of ethnic tribes by the colonisers and question notions such as ethnic authenticity. Such works lay bare the ideological underpinnings of the exoticisation of the other, a process in which costumes play a key role. Shonibare’s works partake of this artistic trend. Born in London but from Nigerian origins, he defines himself as a bicultural artist. His works put cultural hybridity to the fore; his dark-skinned characters, mannequins or actors, seem to take a revenge upon their former masters yet, a closer glance at these works unveils an interesting double-sidedness.

Shonibare’s use of wax fabric, which has been much commented upon (Picton 45–58; Grofilley 12–15, Hemmings 23–50, Cosset 107–17), is a reminder that identity cannot be encapsulated in a single object but is the result of multiple and diverse contacts. While Grace Ndiritu, in Still Life Series, a set of four videos, uses wax fabric to conceal her naked body with her face remaining hidden behind the cloth, Shonibare uses wax fabric in combination with the Western art of dress-making. The costumes he creates reconcile opposites since they are fashioned according to western models but made up of a seemingly African fabric. Wax fabric was in fact produced in Indonesia at a time when it was a Dutch colony. The original technique was simplified when the region came under Dutch rule and the colonisers decided to export the fabric to Ghana, which was a commercial post on the route to India. Once exported, the patterns were altered to suit the taste of the African population (Cosset 109). Africans later imported wax fabric with African patterns produced in Great-Britain by firms such as Vlisco fabrics. Nowadays ATL wax fabrics are often adorned with the faces of celebrities or modern home appliances so that traditional patterns jostle with modern images. The fact that Shonibare buys his ‘African’ fabrics from Brixton market in London adds another layer of complexity since the textiles are now sought after by ‘African-Europeans and Black British people who want to identify with an idealised, invented homeland’ (Kaplan 2002b). Yinka Shonibare is aware of the commercial bent of the Afrocentrism which developed in New-York and London as ‘African Americans wrapped themselves up in all things African, and, in the process, often imagined a place that bore little resemblance to the real Africa’ (Hobbs 27–28). The history of the fabric is one of endless appropriations and adaptations, circulations and exchanges: wax fabric is therefore ‘an identifiable polyvalent sign of colonialism, nationalism, and globalism’ (Hobbs 30). It evidences cultural interconnectedness rather than hegemony. Okwui Enwesor observes, ‘Shonibare’s work is thus an attempt to propose the notion that all forms of culture and identity are
constructed, shaped and reshaped by varying forms of historical conjunctions, appropriations, contestations and refusals’ (Enwesor 2002b, 18).

In William Morris’ Family Album (2015), commissioned by the William Morris Museum, Shonibare has minutely reconstituted 19th-century photographic portraits but replaced the white sitters with people from various ethnic origins dressed in batik period costumes. These mixed family portraits evidence interconnectedness in a multicultural Britain but also evoke the fear of miscegenation during the colonial period. The assertive pose and gaze of some of the black sitters betray their class-consciousness. Wax-fabric is not a signifier for third-world deprivation. One should keep in mind that the artist is from a wealthy African family enjoying some of the privileges of the European elites, like having servants and a chauffeur. One should also be aware that high quality wax fabric was a financial investment for African families, the quality of the fabric being a sign of wealth for the affluent colonised classes (Hobbs 28–29). Shonibare’s work exemplifies the way ‘the continual reabsorption or enfolding of the past in the present, the foreign in the familiar, the self in the other, has a rolling, hybridising effect’ (Papastergiadis 2012). One could view the very making of the costume in which Western patterns are combined with African fabric as a material metaphor for what Papastergiadis calls ‘bridging’: cultural identity, he writes, ‘is formed through the practice of bridging both differences and similitudes between the self and the other’ (Papastergiadis 2002, 98). Differences are sewn together to produce a hybrid costume, a new object.

Homi Bhabha’s and Stuart Hall’s analysis of hybridity may form a theoretical framework from which to consider Shonibare’s costumes: the coloniser’s culture—temporarily keyed to wax fabric—is neither absorbed nor eradicated by the coloniser’s one. Shonibare’s work ‘maps a terrain of transfigurations and transliterations, and rehabilitates impurity’ (Oguibe in Enwesor 2002a, 18); it puts to the fore the fluidity of identities and contradictory practices (Kneller 30–36). Shonibare’s sartorial hybrids substantiate the claim that ‘self-image is formed in, not prior to, the process of interaction with others’ (Papastergiadis 2000, 14–15). The artist explains:

Identity always requires a relationship to others and cannot exist in isolation; that relationship, in turn, is always constructed by your own relationship to others and that is always some kind of fiction. It is the ‘fiction’ that creates an ‘imagined community’ and I don’t deny the use or value in creating a community in itself. [...] I don’t believe that there is such a thing as an innate or intrinsic identity and I am very sceptical of fixed notions of identity that seems to be a way to group different races together. (Simola 199)

His strategy is tantamount to the ‘ironic appropriation and critical incorporation’ (Papastergiadis 2002, 111) which were already at play in cultural forms such as black minstrelsy and its Broadway avatars for instance: agency is restored through pastiche, parody, and critical mimicry. It reflects the shifting patterns of inclusion and exclusion that are at work in global interconnectedness. His work partakes of what Papastergiadis calls ‘translations’: ‘a creative transformation that reorders the very languages within which it operates.’ Now, while hybridity has at times become coterminous with absorption or homogenisation, translation entails some amount of inadequacy: ‘Within the very act of translation there is the confrontation with the abyss of meaning. The non-correspondence between terms, the missing information that would enable a difference to produce an equivalence, heightens the creative sense of alienation in language’ (Papastergiadis 2002, 109). Within this framework, we argue that the absence of heads in Shonibare’s works stands for the remaining inadequacy in the translation.
process. In other words, headlessness may stand for ‘the residual gaps of silence between different cultures’ (Papastergiadis 2002, 111).

Masquerading as othering the self or internalising the other

In Dorian Gray (2001) and The Diary of a Victorian Dandy (1998), two works conjuring up the theme of the Doppelgänger since they hinge on the metamorphosis of a white dandy into a black one, race and social class intersect in a complex manner. Repeatedly, Shonibare stages strange encounters between the self and the other, the other-self. The figure of the black dandy, as described by historians, shows that ethnic identity does not systematically overlap with social status: the dandy aspires to an aristocratic standing and wants to distinguish himself from his middle-class background; to him, dressing and a frivolous lifestyle are political gestures (Dowey 42). The black dandy ‘is a figure who exists in a space between masculine and feminine, homosexual and heterosexual, seeming and being [...]. It is a complicated figure that can, at once, subvert and fulfill normative categories of identity at different times and places as a gesture of self-articulation’ (Miller 5). The dandy never slavishly imitates the dominant group but appropriates the other’s habits, or habitus to borrow from Bourdieu, to refashion his own identity. ‘Black dandies are creatures of invention who continually and characteristically break down limiting identity markers and propose new, more fluid categories within which to constitute themselves’ (Miller 11).

what I like most about the concept of the dandy, Shonibare explains, is that it is the masquerade par excellence. It is a disguise where you appear to be a member of the aristocracy but you are always on the outside. [...] The dandy’s practice takes something that you are supposed to be outside of and re-appropriates it for a different use: to be subversive and challenge the establishment (Simola, 201).

Dandyism, which has everything to do with liminality in that it opts neither for assimilation nor opposition to the dominant culture, can be construed as a metaphor for cross-fertilisation in cultural practices and art.

In The Diary of a Victorian Dandy, where Shonibare’s taste for the theatre is particularly obvious, social status is explicitly seen as self-construction and staging. As Anne Hollander notes, clothes cannot be perceived primarily as cultural by-products or personal expressions but as ‘connected links in a creative tradition of image-making’: ‘Western clothing is not a sequence of direct social and aesthetic messages cast in a language of fabric but rather a form of self-perpetuating visual fiction, like figurative art itself’ (Hollander xv). The narrative photographic work, initially commissioned for the London Underground, is inspired from Hogarth’s moral satires but is equally redolent of TV serials so that high and low culture are enmeshed. The comical effect of the work springs from the combination of explicit visual quotes and transgressive reversals. The black dandy replacing Hogarth’s white rake may have been inspired by Ignatius Sancho, an African house-slave who became a famous man of letters. He is surrounded by white servants who ridiculously adore their masters. One of the white servants, a quote from Hogarth’s Marriage à la Mode, is baffled by the slavish worshipping of the black dandy. The gestures of the protagonists replicate those of Hogarth’s characters but the hyper-realism of the photographs make them seem even more ludicrous. Shonibare’s tribute to Hogarth is relevant as the 18th-century master had an interest in colonial history: several of his
plates are riddled with anti-colonial details while the central presence of black servants in some compositions is crucial to the deciphering of the master's satirical message (Dabydeen). The black figure in Hogarth would embody civilisation whereas the white aristocrats, who unashamedly vent their primitive drives, display savagery. In Shonibare’s series likewise, luxury is keyed to debauchery and excess. There are many parallels between Madame’s Toilette and the fourth plate of Shonibare’s The Diary (19.00): the large curtain evoking a stage or paintings in the background. However, while in Hogarth’s composition, the libertine paintings betray the mistress’s libertine mores, in Shonibare’s photograph, the portraits assert the aristocratic lineage of the dandy. Surprisingly, the sitters in these portraits are white-skinned. Indeterminacy is therefore restored.

Like Shonibare, Mary Sibande, a South-African artist, uses costumes to evoke race, social status, and identity-construction thereby confirming that ‘disguise is a necessary social mechanism for the expression of outrage’ (Klein 70). Both artists borrow from the tradition of the carnivalesque and its excess in clothing to contain racial and social angst. Sibande has created the character of Sophie, an African maid, whose body is moulded on her own. The servant is dressed in huge dresses fashioned like her white mistress’ garments but overwhelming her in an excess of fabric. Throughout the colonial period, slaves and servants would dress up on Sundays and sartorial mimicry was frequent. Some 18th- and 19th-century portraits of servants show them in elegant costumes to the point that they could be mistaken for masters. Several fictional works focusing on the servant-master relationship depict scenes of sartorial reversals as profoundly subversive. If dress plays a central role in the elaboration of rigid social barriers, clothing both maintains and subverts social boundaries and shows ‘how people in different eras have perceived their positions in social structures and negotiated status boundaries’ (Crane 1). Like the mask, the costume others the self and internalises the ethnic, social, or cultural other. When Shonibare was, somehow ironically, made a Member of Order of the British Empire, he decided to tie the title to his name in an act of self-parody or an act of self-hybridisation which is congruent with his work.

Conclusion

By reviving the masquerade, Shonibare discards simplistic polarities to challenge the relevance of artistic, social, racial or cultural categories. Hence, the postmodern label often attached to his works: ‘in the postmodern world all distinctions become fluid, boundaries dissolve, and everything can just as well appear to be its opposite; irony becomes the perpetual sense that things could be somewhat different, though never fundamentally or radically different’ (Matthews 11). Such double-sidedness is also a key-feature of parody and satire which use laughter as a disguise for criticism. Satire can be recuperated as a predominantly aesthetic form so that its radical potential is contained by the socio-cultural order (Matthews 27). Humour has long been double-faced: a vehicle for satire, it contains dissent and fragmentation. In an article on the distribution of the nonsensical, Nicholas Holm argues that humour—which often relies on inconsistency, incongruity, incompatibility—is not always disruptive and systematically endowed with a critical force but that it may contain disruption. This view may constitute another critical lens through which we can appreciate Shonibare’s art and its popularity.
together, which we have likened to bridging, keeps fragmentation away without heading for sterile consensus.

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NOTES

1. On parody and pastiche in postmodern art see ROSE, HUTCHEON, GENETTE, GUTLEBEN.

2. See images of this exhibition at http://www.jamescohan.com/exhibitions/2012-02-16_yinka-shonibare-mbe/1, last accessed on June 4, 2016.

3. On the influence of surrealism on Shonibare see WESTMORELAND-BOUCHARD.

4. RYAN cites the works of Canadian artist Brian JUNGEN who uses Nike shoes to produce mock primitive masks in a way that is reminiscent of Shonibare’s use of batik to fashion Western costumes.

5. FRYE notes that two things are essential to satire, namely wit or humour founded on fantasy or a sense of the grotesque and an object of attack.

6. ‘All translations are unpredictable because, like strange attractors that shape turbulence in the physical world, their meaning and associations are formed in a field that is not predetermined by a fixed set of coordinates but shaped by signs which themselves are mobile and bifurcate through their own operational stretching and folding’ (PAPASTERGIADIS 2012, 111)

7. The exhibition of the Diary at the Nouveau Musée National de Monaco (Looking up!) adds a new dimension to the series as it is displayed in a room dedicated to Jean-François BOSIO and his satires.

ABSTRACTS

Yinka Shonibare, a British artist from Nigerian origins, is heir to the tradition of masquerading and, like many postmodern and postcolonial artists, uses clothing and costuming as a means to probe identity construction. By revisiting European masterpieces or parodying academic painting he underscores the artificiality of art and explores power-relations from an artistic, cultural, but also economic and ideological perspective. The presence of the fabric enables him to replace the colonised on the historical stage. His combination of wax-fabric, a signifier for cultural interconnectedness, and period costumes is compared to the process of translation as defined by globalisation theorists. Wavering between parody and satire, his installations operate multiple critical strategies hinging on humour as a means of containing fragmentation. This analysis focuses on costuming as a complex tool for exploring the other and the self.

Yinka Shonibare, artiste britannique d’origine nigériane, poursuit la tradition de la mascarade et, comme bien des artistes postmodernes et postcoloniaux, utilise le vêtement et le déguisement comme moyen d’explorer la construction identitaire. En revisitant les chefs-d’œuvre de l’histoire de l’art occidentale et en parodiant la peinture académique, il souligne l’artificialité de l’art et explore les relations de pouvoir d’un point de vue artistique, culturel, mais aussi économique et idéologique. L’utilisation du batik, exemple parfait d’interconnections culturelles, pour la
réalisation de costumes d’époque, est comparée ici au processus de traduction défini par les théoriciens de la mondialisation. Oscillant entre parodie et satire, les installations de Shonibare développent des stratégies critiques multiples reposant sur l’humour comme rempart contre la fragmentation. Nous proposons une approche de son œuvre centrée sur le déguisement, dispositif complexe permettant d’examiner tant l’autre que le soi.

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**Keywords:** masquerade, costuming, postmodern, postcolonial, textile, wax-fabric, satire, parody, translation, trickster, hybridity

**Mots-clés:** mascarade, déguisement, postmoderne, postcolonial, textile, batik, satire, parodie, traduction, hybridité

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