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Structure, Cladding and Detail: The role of textiles in the associations between identity, the interior and dress, 1860-1920

Clive Edwards

She had always loved colour in the skies, in the landscape, in the texture of stuff and garments; now out of the chaotic skein of countless shops she could choose and pick and mingle her threads in a glow of feminine self-expression (Wells 1912: Chapter 1).

In 1917, in his introductory lectures on psycho-analysis, Sigmund Freud used the bourgeois interior complete with hall, drawing room and a threshold as a metaphor for 'the system of the unconscious'. For him this notion of interiority was more than a metaphor, it was a mental structure that was stronger than the actual fabric of a building (Fuss 6). Beverly Gordon has suggested that in the later nineteenth century women decorated rooms as a reflection of their selves, their individuality and their personality. Gordon posited that when women dressed furniture with ruffles and fringes they were metaphorically making extensions of themselves (281). The implication of these two aspects of the idea of the interior is that the image of the self ([identity](#)) is launched outward from the body or mind and returned or reflected as the decorated interior. These signals were particularly important in this period, when external appearances were considered to reflect the hidden character of people and places [and material culture was crucial in identity formation](#). It will be argued that these reflections or mirrorings of the self through interiors and dress work in two

ways, namely how one sees oneself internally as an individual (Freud), as well as how one wants to be seen by an audience (Gordon). Textiles are key to an understanding of the quest for individual identity (the performance of self) and the role performativity and theatricality play in interiors of this period.

Judith Butler suggests that 'gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being' (43). This concept of gender reinforces the idea that the presentation of self in an interior is a [continual](#) stylized performance expressing identity. Both for dress and the interior, textiles are part of the 'regulatory frame' and both 'reflect' an individual and reinforce established ideas about the self. On the one hand, decisions about self-presentation are subjective and individual, but they are also mitigated, on the other hand, by codes of appropriate behaviour and environment, which are informed by the 'regulatory frame', which enforces a degree of conformity. Therefore, a performance of the self may well maintain a notion of 'interior' and 'exterior' as in some ways distinct, even if they are 'entangled', whilst a performative account might remove the idea of the two sides i.e. interior/exterior so that the interior is nothing but the residue left from the repetitive performance of the conventions of the exterior.

The performative sense of Butler's definition of gender is evident in the way women use decorative objects ([fabrication in Butler's terms](#)) in the home to reinforce their presentation; whilst the objects themselves and the accepted use of them in society limit women's choices and reinforce existing gender functions. This suggests that the languages of dress and interiors question the woman-as-subject at the very same time that they articulate her agency. Women and interiors and dress were partners in creating female subjectivity as we understand it to have existed at the time,

but also were changed in their encounter with one another, so that female subjectivity does not remain a fixed or essential quality to be (or have been) expressed.

The connection between performativity and the notion of the self was developed by [sociologist Erving Goffman](#), who claimed that the ‘self is a product of performance in social interaction’. Goffman argues that ‘self-presentation is a crucial determinant of one’s very sense of self’ (170). The self is shaped in this process; ‘[t]he individual is able to present an image of self that is accepted by others in social situations that is mainly determined by social categories, status and resources’ (Goffman 171). Goffman also provides an analysis of interactions that are useful here (240). He investigates individual identity, group relations, the impact of environment and the movement and interactive meanings of information. He sees people as actors that present themselves in a particular context. Their ‘performances’ create impressions that are conveyed to the ‘audience’ on a ‘stage setting’, which itself is part of the performance. Goffman uses a ‘dramaturgical approach’ in his work, which places the mode of presentation employed by the actor and its meaning within the broader social context.¹ Identity creation and maintenance is therefore closely linked to the notion of the front, which was the location of the self-presentation, or in this case, the interior. The interior, therefore, acts as a setting for the social role assumed by the actor. This process is maintained by the activities of ‘impression management,’ the control or lack of control as well as the communication of information throughout the performance. [Indeed the continual repetition of performance might be seen to continually re-inforce the ‘suspended existence’ of the later nineteenth century bourgeoisie.](#)

The regulatory framework that surrounds interior decoration and the presentation of self through dress, amongst other systems, are part of a semiotic

network. The network is built up from diverse actors, human and non-human and the materiality of the space in which these operate. What is particularly relevant is how the network operates, negotiates, holds itself together and sustains itself (Law). One of the most important of these negotiations is 'translation', a complex relationship in which actors construct common definitions and meanings, define how they are to be signified and then work together in the pursuit of individual and collective objectives. One of the key forums in which these 'translations' manifested themselves was the domestic interior, [dress](#) and the textiles associated with them. The importance of the material in understanding society has been emphasised by Jean Baudrillard: '[Objects] speak to us not so much of the user and technical practices, as of social pretension and resignation, of social mobility and inertia, of acculturation and enculturation, of stratification and social classification' (38). This approach can be used to explore the role of dress, textiles, drapery and soft furnishings in the domestic environments between 1860 and 1920 in the English-speaking world. However, although Baudrillard's point is valid to a degree, he does not take into account the role of the user as an agent who employs the objects as part of the performative.

To operate successfully, objects had to be woven together in a 'material and semiotic' context. To understand how it worked, the 'material-semiotic' methodology can be used to unravel the connections between material objects, like textiles, dress and interior design, and particular semiotic practices. A semiotic relationality creates networks whose elements define and shape one another. In this case, in addition to furnishing and bodily roles, textiles can be used to further demonstrate theatricality and festivity; ambiguity and curiosity; cladding and wrapping; concealing and revealing; modesty and vanity; the reserved and the obtrusive; exoticism and technical virtuosity. This essay will therefore use this theoretical base to explore the

relationships or networks that link the three elements of structure, cladding and decorative details in textiles and interiors [in relation to issue of identity](#).

Performance as a means of identification for the social elite was not particular to the nineteenth century. The notion had been successfully demonstrated during the eighteenth century, especially in France, and particularly with furniture. However, in the nineteenth century this notion of performativity, especially for middle-class Victorians, became an integral part of the social network and often a source of anxiety. In addition to the interior itself, performativity as acting is also represented by dress as part of ‘impression management’. It could be argued that in the second half of the nineteenth century an important change occurred when dress was transformed from being mere clothing, to an accessory [of](#) planned self-definition for a wider range of consumers than ever before. This idea of ‘fashion’ has to be addressed here in relation to interiors and dress, in the sense that fashion presents both a connection with modernity and personality or distinctiveness. The role of fashionable clothing has been widely and variously interpreted. Dirk Lauwaert suggests that ‘clothing does not represent, it presents. Clothing does not define, it positions’ (4).

The same may be said of interiors. [In both cases textiles are one of the most important](#) ~~Indeed, analysis of the interrelationship between clothing and interiors, as methods of self-definition, is developed below.~~

The link between clothes and interiors was well understood in the nineteenth century. In 1869, the feminist writer Francis Power Cobbe made a metaphoric connection between clothing, interiors and character when he stated that ‘[t]he more womanly a woman is, the more she is sure to throw her personality over the home, and transform it... into a sort of outermost garment of her soul; harmonized with all her nature as her robe and the flower in her hair are harmonized with her bodily

beauty' (qtd. in Butler 1869: 10-11). This comment reflects the contemporary idea of the 'self as a work of art' whereby a bourgeois woman is an artistic production in the same way as her surroundings.

Twelve years later, Mrs. Haweis was more explicit: 'Rooms being a background for human beings, and coloured surfaces having definite artistic relations to one another, different hues must be arranged with thought and skill where juxtaposition to faces and complexions is unavoidable, i.e., not only in dress but in the wall papers and furniture of rooms' (1881: 23). In both these examples, there is evidence of the performative, and refers to the idea of the theatricality of the interior. In terms of display, the connection between those who occupy the spaces and the 'props' that surround them are inseparable and form a complete experience, which can be equated to the notion of the *gesamtkunstwerk*.

The sociologist and cultural critic Walter Benjamin succinctly explains the changes in nineteenth-century society that were responsible, in part, for the development of the interior as a theatrical space:

For the private citizen, for the first time the living-space became distinguished from the place of work. The former constituted itself as the interior. The office was its complement. The private citizen who in the office took reality into account, required of the interior that it should support him in his illusions... From this sprang the phantasmagorias of the interior. This represented the universe for the private citizen. In it he assembled the distant in space and in time. His drawing-room was a box in the world-theatre (1983: 4).

Textiles were an integral part of the furnishings of this theatrical space, the backdrop for social rituals and the personal dressing (or costumes) of the individuals involved. The role of women in this scenario is crucial to the understanding of the connections between dress, interior and society. Whether we accept or reject the concept of 'separate spheres', there is no doubt that women had a major role to play in creating interiors, as producers, directors and actors. In 1917, American author Emily Burbank expressed women's performative role to demonstrate the compatibility of dress and interior, when she acknowledges the theatricality of homes:

To make our points clear, constant reference to the stage is necessary; for from stage effects we are one and all free to enjoy and learn. Nowhere else can the woman see so clearly presented the value of having what she wears harmonise with the room she wears it in, and the occasion for which it is worn... What is taught by the modern stage ... is values, as the artist uses the term not fashions; the relative importance of background, outline, colour, texture of material and how to produce harmonious effects by the judicious combination of furnishings and costumes (32).

It would seem, therefore, that women are performing their gender roles [and thus their identity both visually and materially](#) -through the use of staged space. In the foreword to *Woman as Decoration*, Burbank states:

'Having assisted in setting the stage [i.e. preparing the interior in her previous work *The Art of Interior Decoration* from 1917] for woman, the next logical step is consideration of woman, herself, as an important factor in the

decorative scheme of any setting – the vital spark to animate all interior decoration private or public (Foreword).

Forty years before Burbank's assessment, the behaviour of the heroine of Margaret Oliphant's 1866 novel entitled *Miss Marjoribanks*, explored these same connections between dress and interiors. Andrea Tange notes that the heroine decided on new curtain material 'by examining the colour against her face in one of the mirrors of the upholster's shop', so that she could see how she looked against it rather than any of the intrinsic qualities of the cloth itself. (8). This fictional passage is revealing in its exploration of the relationship of the customer to the materials to be purchased. The process of comparison of Miss Majoribanks' complexion with the material confused the retailer as to whether it was being purchased for use as dress or furnishings.

This idea of the appropriate background was clearly an important part of the social round, as a reflection of social position or as a setting for an unmarried woman to display her charms in company. The decorated theatrical back-drop joins with the decorated woman to create a masquerade with connotations of both costume and pretence and so relates back to the performative nature of the interior. The masquerade thus forms the crux of gender by flaunting an applied femininity that eventually appears to be natural behaviour.

Baudrillard offers a further approach to the theatrical in his 'concept of underlining'. Baudrillard considers that the role of objects, among other things, is to emphasise ownership and status. In his essay 'The tactic of the pot and its saucer', he states: 'Here we consider redundancy, the whole baroque and theatrical covering of domestic property... [where] the obsession of the cottage owner and small capitalist is not merely to possess, but to underline what he possesses two or three times' (1981: 42). This redundancy of objects underlines what is possessed and part of bourgeois

identity, even though the objects may actually be superfluous: the swags and tails at window pelmets are a good example of this. ~~The idea of the ‘baroque and theatrical’ nature of the display of possessions links with the notion of appropriateness of background.~~ Baudrillard further suggests that it is how *well* one possesses that is important: ‘The psychological function of reassuring the owner of his possessions, but also the sociological function of affiliating him with the whole class of individuals who possess in the same way’ (42). In this way, both dress and décor create networks of identity association with one’s peers. Contemporary novelists used these ideas as devices to locate their characters. Michael Moon suggests that novelist Henry James, for example, uses textiles as a marker of status, and hence identity: ‘Velvet still bears the unambiguously positive charge it had earned forty years before in Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair*, the repository of so many of James’s basic props for signalling fine degrees of upward and downward social mobility’ (25).

Writing in 1879, Mrs Haweis opened Chapter III of her *The Art of Dress* with the comment: ‘The three great requirements of dress are 1 to protect, 2 to conceal, 3 to display’ (1879: 24). Although she did not intend to relate dress to architecture or interiors here, the connections between structure as protection, cladding as concealment and display as detail, can be made. Indeed, the contrasting ideas of concealing and revealing, prudence and imprudence, modesty and vanity, and the reserved and obtrusive are evident in both clothing and interior decoration. The masquerade continues.

Structure

The idea that the human body is simultaneously a structure of regular components and the carrier of the individual’s identity refers us back to concepts of the interior. This is

particularly so when, in the nineteenth century, houses were often referred to with biological metaphors, which spoke of bodily systems, the organism of the house and its skeletal framework or shell (Gordon 287). Maria Parola, a home economics author, wrote [in 1906](#) that '[a] modern house might be likened to an animal organism, the framework being the skeleton, and the plumbing the circulatory system' (4).

This skeletal framework is expressed through interior decoration. The particular method of expression can take many forms, but textiles were certainly a very important element, and not only for furnishings. Paraphrasing Benjamin, Michael Moon puts it perfectly:

Bourgeois domestic interiors had become velvet and plush-lined carapaces for a social class that seemed to want to insulate itself from the world....behind a grotesque barrier of such luxury fabrics – in clothing for ordinary and ceremonial occasions, in upholstery and wall coverings, and perhaps most significantly, in linings for instrument cases, jewelry boxes and coffins (25).

As Moon suggests, the ultimate symbiosis of textile, furnishing and body might well be found in the late Victorian coffin. Indeed the following description from 1885 could refer to a window dressing, a garment or as in this case a coffin: 'A royal purple casket [dress or curtain] of the heaviest Geneva velvet...was lined with that delicate shade of cream satin...another of white cashmere, draped in heavy folds, hanging in half moons and caught at every interval with splendid white silk tassels, each draping being trimmed with a narrow silk fringe' (Grier 153). The connection between dress and the interior as architectural construction needs further consideration. As they are both articulated around openings and joints, both have an inside and an outside, a top and a bottom, to cite only a few similarities. Dirk Lauwert suggests that clothing can be seen as an architectural construction: 'Cutting the cloth ... the seams ... the

inserting of fittings like the corset for women ... make the architecture not a metaphor but a substantial part of the clothing. This architecture is a truss on to which the walls are hung. It is therefore like a house in motion' (6).

Whether the structure was the architectural shell or the human frame, the use of textiles as a method of softening the look of the body or the interior ambience was important. Benjamin considered the role of textiles in this softening process: 'Against the armature of glass and iron, upholstery offers resistance with its textiles' (1999: 218). The resistance to which he refers is the protective domestic cocoon created by large quantities of textiles and associated soft furnishings that muffled sounds, softened light and gave rooms a feeling of luxury and comfort. It also, and perhaps more profoundly, reflects an escape from the pace of change that was occurring. A report in a leading French magazine of the mid-nineteenth century gave a vivid idea of the draped bourgeois cocoon that appears to have given this 'symbolic protection' to the inhabitants: 'We gathered in a small salon, which was tightly sealed by excellent door curtains, silk pads, and double drapes.... A good carpet lies underfoot...A profusion of fabrics graces the windows, covers the mantelpiece, and hides the woodwork. Dry wood and cold marble are concealed beneath velvet and plush' (Perrot 369). ~~This issue of the domestic cocoon was directly connected to the role of women and the creation of the domestic interior.~~ The concept of a 'softened' home as a haven from the outside world was summed eloquently by John Ruskin: 'home—it is the place of Peace; the shelter, not only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt, and division.' (Lecture II) For Ruskin, it was the role of women to create and maintain this state of domestic bliss. [This issue of the domestic cocoon was directly connected to the role of women, the creation of the domestic interior and bourgeois identities.](#)

The cloaking of structure [through cladding](#) might also be manifest through the upholstered easy chair [that](#) was ‘a skeleton entirely cloaked and enveloped in fabric, and voluminous cushions, usually built around spiral springs’ (Giedion 376).

Alternatively, it might be complex and convoluted drapery effects that were fitted to windows, doors or *toilette* tables. In the case of dress, the structures or frames including corsets, crinoline frames and, later, bustles or tournures, were all intended to support the cladding [dress] in one form or another. [The effects of these fashionable arrangements were to ensure the enduring recognition of self, both bodily and spatially.](#)

Cladding

In 1851, architect Gottfried Semper published his theory of the *Four Elements of Architecture* in which he broke down architecture into four basic elements: Hearth, Roof, Mound and Fence. His analysis of the Fence principle of walling focused on the relations between the techniques of fencing and those of weaving. This established his idea of the original wall as a form of hanging textile. Semper also compared the coating of the architectural structure to the clothing that shrouds the human body. Cladding is a way by which both the human and the architectural body go beyond their own materiality to camouflage the structure and allow decorative details to be applied to delineate aspects of either the body or the space.² In 1860 Semper further associated architectural cladding with clothing, when he wrote in *Der Stil* that ‘almost all structural symbols ... are motives ... borrowed directly from the domain of costumes and, in particular, from its finery’ (Canales and Herscher 244). Whether or not architecture evolved from structures hung with textiles, as Semper suggests, is not

the point here. Rather, it is that the metaphor of textiles as architecture can help to explain the mid-nineteenth-century preoccupation with drapery both for the interior and garments.

Cladding is defined here as walling treatments, portières, curtains and flooring material treatments that assist in the articulation of a structure, whether fashion or furnishings. Commentators from the period were clear about the relationship between dress and furnishings. In the *Art of Decoration*, Mrs. ~~Mrs.~~ Haweis suggested that “furniture is a kind of dress, dress is a kind of furniture, which both mirror the mind of the owner, and the temper of the age” (1881: 17). This sophisticated phrase begins to link furniture, dress, the occupier and the wider world in a network that the public was clearly aware of.

This network also included a sensory relationship between textiles and the occupiers of a room. The softening effects of padded upholstery, tapestry wall hangings, draped windows and even tented ceilings not only blurred the architectural shapes but created ambiguity. In 1881 Janet Ruutz-Rees wrote in her advice book on home decoration: ‘So many delightful possibilities are concealed by a curtain; not to mention the skilful hiding of defects made visible with such means, or the softening of angles and happy obliteration of corners’ (Grier 237). This concept of concealment and identity reflects back to the notions of masquerade and performance whereby textiles acted as the mask of the individual in dress, and of the interior in terms of furnishings.

The softening effects of textiles, drapery and passementerie as cladding were also clearly understood by fiction writers of the time. Literary scholarship makes a distinction and marks out a relationship between interiors as both the ‘inner nature’ of

people and as an inside space. Mrs Proby wrote of a fictional Hynde House in her novel *The Dennes of Daundelyonn* in which the lack of softness was evident:

The tables were square, the ottomans, windows, seats, mirrors, screens, fenders all were square. ... There was one solitary exception to the general squareness, and that was a large circular table in the centre of the room, but the absence of a table cloth made that seem formal and frigid. Finally there was a great glare and blaze of sunshine by day and of gas by night -no softness, no repose, no mystery, and a general deficiency of tassels and cushions (197-98).

It comes as no surprise to find that the inhabitants of this interior were also depicted as formal and frigid. The formidable Mrs Way was described as

Tall, bony, sallow, rigid, frigid, unsmiling, expressionless ... she entered stiffly, and therefore awkwardly extending; a large cold stony paw for each of us to shake in succession. We performed the social ceremony with a praiseworthy attempt at cordiality, though Ernie afterwards vowed her fingers were so hard and sharp that it was like shaking hands with a bunch of keys (199).

In these two fictional passages, the apparent connection between the furnishings, the domestic space and the identity of the owner is made very clear, as is the notion of performance as a social ritual, with all its formal and hidden aspects

Association of the body and interior

The conjunction of body, textiles and spaces shaped identity for the bourgeoisie. How to ensure this process was successful often required advice ~~was evident~~ found in the

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myriad guidance books and magazine columns that were published. Historian Beverley Gordon has pointed out how the ‘rules about what the woman must and must not wear, and under what circumstances, and what she must and must not use in various rooms of the house were shaped by the same sensibility [as to self-presentation] and were closely parallel’. She goes on to demonstrate how a breakfast room might be decorated with lightweight cottons and light colour linens, which reflect the ‘kinds of fabrics worn by fashionable women before noon’. In the dining room ‘richly colored silks and velvets’ with ‘complex arrangements of drapery and trim’ reflected evening dresses of the 1880s (Gordon 286). This is a fine example of the connections between body and interior decorative schemes, as well as a representation of the prescriptive nature of these choices.

This connection between ~~the~~ self-identity and surroundings was recognized at the time. Mrs. Haweis wrote that

[t]here is no doubt that people look different in different rooms. A pale person in a pale room is obliterated, whereas in a deep or richly coloured room, the paleness might become enhanced and beautiful... [Some people] look vulgar in one place and refined in another – so great is the effect of surroundings on the appearance (1878: 205).

Burbank also makes the now familiar point about self-presentation and colour:

If your rooms are so-called period rooms, you need not of necessity dress in period costumes, but what is extremely important, if you would not spoil your period room, nor fail to be a decorative contribution when in it, is that you make a point of having the colour and texture of your house gowns in the same key as the hangings and upholstery of your room (40).

The detail of this colour matching between clothes and furnishings is astonishing, as it varies between rooms:

If the walls, woodwork and furniture have been kept very light in tone, relying on the rugs and cushions and dark foliage of plants to give character, then a costume of sheer material in any one of the decided colours in the chintz cushions, will be a welcome contribution to the decoration of the sun-room. Additional effect can be given a costume by the clever choice of colour and line in a work-bag (Burbank, 43).

Finally, the last remark in Burbank's book asks the reader to '[r]emember, that while an inartistic room, confused as to line and colour-scheme can absolutely destroy the effect of a perfect gown, an inartistic, though costly gown can likewise be a blot on a perfect room' (183). The links between dress and interior decoration could not be much more explicit.

Dressing the room as one might dress the body

Following the intimate association of women with their interior schemes there are many crossovers. Gordon has suggested that women's bodies and interior drapery are similar in that they both use multiple layers of cloth, a variety of trimmings and a multiplicity of textiles (289). Contemporary examples are not hard to find. The *London Society* an illustrated magazine noted that '[t]he general rules we adopt for the decoration or furnishing of our rooms may be applied to costume. Dress may be considered the ground work of the whole toilette' (1862, Vol II, 80). By this the author proscribed using darker, heavier colours for the ground or lower parts of the room, keeping the lighter, transparent colours for the upper portions. In 1875,

'Humming Bird', the author of a series of articles for the *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* commented on the extravagant use of 'soft cashmeres and other expensive materials, fit to drape the "human form divine" [that] are used for covering chairs and couches, and for window curtains' (1 June 1875: 328). [A few years later in her 'Home Advice' column in the magazine *Hearth and Home*, Mrs Talbot Coke replied to a correspondent named 'Bert'. Coke said: 'I should prefer a long stole like slip the width of the mantel piece, but hanging down half a yard at each end, lined, and with ends trimmed with "Giant tassel fringe" 2s 3d the yard from W. Oliver, 12 Westbourne Grove' \(February 1892\).](#)

Mrs. Haweis also pointed out how 'the colours which are fit for dress are fit for furniture, which is a kind of detached dress, influencing appearance in somewhat the same way' (1881: 363). Joel Sanders has pointed out that the term "'window dressing," with its allusion to apparel', makes the same connections as Mrs Haweis does in terms of 'outfitting' the window (3).

Mrs Haweis again comments on the decorative value of textiles and drapery: 'I like curtains at every window, and over every door. I like pretty stuffs, furs, embroideries, and mats flung loose over couches and pianos. They fall then at every corner and every wrinkle into nice natural folds, so much pleasanter than tightly fitting cases, further tightened by buttons' (1881: 303). [A clear comparison with contemporary dress practices.](#)

Sometimes the relationship between dress and furnishings seemed to go too far for some. French historian Alain Corbin has compared lingerie to drapery, both of which developed greater levels of luxury and opulence in drapery and upholstery, which he suggests reflects the 'perverse effects of modesty' found in the elaboration of lingerie and the subsequent rituals of the toilette (Rice 279). [Edith Wharton in her](#)

Decoration of Houses commented on this connection between lingerie and interiors:

Muslin window curtain is a recent invention. Its only purpose is to protect the interior of the room from the public view: a need not felt before the use of large sheets of glass.... Lingerie effects do not combine well with architecture, and the more architecturally a window is treated the less it needs to be dressed up in ruffles (72).

This comment appears to reflect the ideas of contemporary design reformers who wanted to remove applied or excess decoration from architecture and interiors. —

Architect and designer Charles Eastlake criticised the fussy interiors of contemporary women's bedrooms claiming: 'in the midst of lace bed-curtains, muslin toilet covers, pink calico, and cheval glasses, one might fancy oneself in a milliner's shop' (201). Writing about the fashions of the day and reversing the discussion, J.W. Sampson, a German dress historian, wrote in 1873 that 'when the giant skirts that stretched over cushions attached to the derriere, with their gathered draperies, their pleated frills, their embroidery, and their ribbons, seems to have issued less from the workshop of a tailor, than from that of an upholsterer' (Benjamin 1999: 69). The derogatory connection between fashion and interiors was referenced obliquely towards the end of the period in Davis Benn's criticism of 'the overdone, puffy, milliner's shop style of upholstery, with its flounces and furbelows, which constitutes a refuge in many modern homes for tired nature - and dust' (62). Edith Wharton in her

Decoration of Houses commented unfavourably on this connection between lingerie and interiors:

Muslin window-curtain is a recent invention. Its only purpose is to protect the interior of the room from the public view: a need not felt before the use of large sheets of glass.... Lingerie effects do not combine well with architecture.

and the more architecturally a window is treated the less it needs to be dressed up in ruffles (72).

These sorts of comments reflect a bigger issue around the notion of decoration in design generally, and point to the changes that were occurring in attitudes to design that would eventually lead to modernism.

Textiles and the Interior

Textiles nevertheless had a crucial role to play in cladding the interior. It is in surfaces located on the body and in spaces that a demonstration of the identity of the user can be found. In some cases they offered opportunities for self-expression, but in others they were challenges to the unwary. A perfect example of textiles as surface that was used in the interior that also demonstrates the theatricality of such objects is the *portière*. The *portière*, originally intended to keep out draughts, became an often extravagant, decorative framework for an opening or doorway that frequently framed the vignette of the room next door (Grier 257). This framing, which was frequently created by *portières* that were often permanently fixed back, reflected the curtains at the side of a proscenium that framed the stage. ~~E.A. Moreland considered that ‘the single faced velours are very suitable for appliqué work, and handsome *portières* can be made in that manner; good effects are also produced by inserting borders of figured velours, or by adding deep, heavy, netted fringe at the top or over the dado’ (Moreland 180). Finally, he~~ E.A. Moreland recommended mohair plush or, even better, silk plush, which represented the epitome of bourgeois luxury for both dress and furnishings. The latter also offered an opportunity for flower painting as it receives paint well ‘and a very dainty *portière* for a boudoir could be made in this manner’ (Moreland 180). The importance of the embellishing or layering of textiles

[referring back to Baudrillard's notion of redundancy] is evident in this advice, which also gave women an opportunity to embellish textiles with their own hands. This gave women a canvas upon which to demonstrate the skills of their gender. Interestingly, the re-use of dress fabrics was evident. Referring to *portières*, the 1897 edition of *How to Build Furnish and Decorate* noted that '[m]any of the old style shawls make very handsome hangings, their soft texture drapes well and in many cases their colors are exquisite' (198).

In some cases, the textiles used, especially for upholstery, sometimes tested civility and gentility. The example of 'slippery chintz' was one such trap in the literal performance of sitting down in a genteel manner. In 1853, Walter Evelyn wrote about his furnishings in his Dresden home, stating: 'It is as well to study the art of balancing oneself under difficulties before attempting even to sit down; for these articles of furniture are induced with an inner garment of a poor but gaudy kind of satin, extremely slippery, and an outer one of glazed chintz' (193). ~~Mrs Charles Proby's 1859 novel, *The Dennes of Daundelyonn*, had a slightly different but equally pointed issue with chintz: 'to complete the idea of coldness, the chintz covers on every kind of seat were so slippery, glazed, and crackling, that they were invitations to shudder at rather than repose upon' (197). [A result of comfort and convenience sacrificed at the altar of presentation.](#)~~

In 1917, Burbank expounded a few rules for the perfect costuming [or cladding] of woman in her *Women as Decoration*:

Appropriateness for each occasion so as to get efficiency, or be as decorative as possible.

Outline. Fashion in silhouette adapted to your own type.

Background. Your setting.

Colour scheme. Fashionable colours chosen and combined to express your personality as well as to harmonise with the tone of setting, or, if preferred, to be an agreeable contrast to it.

Detail. Trimming with *raison d'être*, not meaningless superfluities (183).

Change a word or two and she could be talking about an interior.

Detail

One of the hallmarks of both dress and furnishings of the period is the volume and intricacy of decorative detail, and refers back to Baudrillard's underlining notion that the layering and building up of surfaces emphasises quantity, if not quality. It is no surprise, then, that the dress reform movement and the demand for less ornamented interiors should have developed at the same time, as a reaction to the overblown use of textiles and trimmings in both areas. Regardless of the demands of reformers who were, in the main, a particular educated, artistic elite, there was a delight in detail in textiles for both the body and the interior [that reflected a bourgeois attention to material traces.](#)

In the same way as ruffles, bolsters, scarves, shawls, braids, buttons, bows and other trimmings ornamented dress and created interest, so it was with interior textile furnishings. In fact, the language is directly translated from dress to home making. Textile-based embellishments were often interchangeable in name at least. Indeed, it is this accessorization, often with objects created by the women of the house that injected elements of individuality into their interiors.

In the same way that dress was often a combination of fashion, personal selection of fabrics and colours and home needlework, so it was with furnishings. It is

noteworthy that the blend of industrially produced borders, fringes, trimmings and passementerie were used in combination with other textiles that were individually hand produced by the user, whether used on dress or furnishings to personalise the goods.

For Roland Barthes '[f]ashion must elaborate meanings whose fabrication does not appear costly; this is the case of the "detail": one detail is enough to transform what is outside meaning, what is unfashionable into fashion and yet a detail is not expensive' (8). This analysis seems to support the idea that detail on both dresses and furnishing accessories had a role as both a fashion signifier and as a personalizing tool. [In other words, a 'prop' for identity creation and the performance of self.](#) Barthes suggests for this to work, the marginal or elusive detail has to be 'found'. In terms of the interior, this detail is reflected in the personalisation of the objects made or found by women for their home decoration, which then represent their 'taste'.

The fashionable American decorator Elsie De Wolfe provides a sensual description of the intricate, [but important](#) details of a small piece of textile work, which sits between furnishing and clothing:

Now I am telling you of the 'couvre pieds' because I know all women love exquisite things, and surely nothing could be more delicious than my couvre-pieds. Literally, it is a "cover for the feet," a sort of glorified and diminutive coverlet, made of the palest of pink silk, lined with the soft long-haired white fur known as mountain tibet, and interlined with down. The coverlet is bordered with a puffing of French lace, and the top of it is encrusted with little flowers made of tiny French picot ribbons, and quillings of the narrowest of

lace. It is supposed to be thrown over your feet, fur side down, when you are resting or having your hair done (Chapter XV).

[The analysis of this description that explores materials and usage through exotic and sensual imagery demonstrates a direct relationship between ‘upholstered’ textiles and the body.](#)

This desire for textile objects was not just a feminine pleasure. Benjamin considered the idea of men’s traces of the occupancy of rooms that remain: ‘For slippers and pocket watches, thermometers and egg cups, cutlery and umbrellas, it [the bourgeoisie] tries to get covers and cases. It [the bourgeoisie] prefers velvet and plush covers, which preserve the impression of every touch’ (1983: 46). Not only does this demonstrate the effort to soften surfaces but also it is another example of the redundant use of layers of textiles.

One of the neglected areas of furnishing and dress that is explicitly used for detailing is passementerie or trimmings. [These details elaborate the shapes of the furniture and the body and constitute a connection between textiles, spaces and bodies.](#) For example, lace was used for pattern and as a contrast to heavier fabrics, especially in window treatments. Depending on the fashion, women’s clothes would also be trimmed with various quantities of lace detail. Trimmings reflected femininity, either in the room or on the body. In the last decades of the nineteenth century, scarf draperies [again a cross-over textile] were a particular fashion. One example from 1890 described the French arrangement of a fireplace with ‘a combination of dark green plush, set off with old pink silk, which is embroidered with floss silk in delicate shades of green, pink and gold, edged with long tassels in variegated chenille. Ball fringe in gold gimp around the mantel board, and the side scarf end’ (Grier 171). [The](#)

[drapery of a fireplace, like the drapery of bodily fashion links the individual's corporeal and spatial identity.](#)

In connection with this role of passementerie, Elaine Freedgood has asked: 'Is the object of trimming to obscure edges or call attention to them' (258)? The idea of trimmings was in part an act of concealing that in turn accentuated something else elsewhere, that is, accentuation implies concealment.³ The ambiguous meanings of textiles in the interior also introduce issues around perception. Gen Doy has pointed to how the curtain has a certain duality, due to its double sidedness, its ability to reveal and conceal and its role as both decoration and function (10-11). This surely continues to reflect the performative nature of textiles by way of a masquerade, whereby the curtain can be deployed at once as both decorative prop and something to hide behind.

Later in the period, there was clearly a reaction to the overdressed woman or room. Again, we can call on literature to explore the nature and meaning of interiors and what they represented. In Henry James's novel *Wings of a Dove* (1902) he records the male protagonist Merton Densher's reaction to a 'colossally vulgar' drawing room: 'He had never dreamed of anything so fringed and scalloped, so buttoned and corded, drawn everywhere so tight and curled everywhere so thick' (Logan 89). A few years later, George Ponderevo, the hero of H.G. Wells's novel *Tono-Bungay* (1909) commented on the detailed covering and decorating of his uncle's parlour:

My most immediate impression was of the remarkable fact that something was hung about or wrapped round or draped over everything. There was bright-patterned muslin round the gas-bracket in the middle of the room, round the mirror over the mantel, stuff with ball-fringe along the mantel and casing in the fireplace, I first saw ball-fringe here, and even the lamp on the little bureau

wore a shade like a large muslin hat. The table-cloth had ball-fringe and so had the window curtains, and the carpet was a bed of roses (Chapter 4).

Even though he did not critique the room as strongly as Densher, there is a sense of ~~the ridiculous overuse of trimmings that comes through the passage that this self-fashioning was slightly ridiculous, but we should not dismiss it, as these alternative narratives to modernism reflect the reality of many domestic material and aesthetic choices.~~

Conclusion

Although textiles often have clear architectural and bodily roles, this analysis of the interior, through structure, cladding and detail, has demonstrated the theatrical, performative and self-representational possibilities they offer in relation to identity. Through structural use, cladding and wrapping, and the application of decorative trimmings, textiles have become a unifying vehicle as a genre. An understanding of ~~the this~~ role of textiles in the later Victorian interior can assist in evaluating the material semiotic network that used textiles for both dress furniture and interiors as part of a very successful process of creating and performance of self-image and identity, maintaining social/cultural norms over the period. This process is aided by the application of theoretical perspectives onto the material culture of the time so that a fuller understanding of historical 'ways of living' can be achieved.

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Notes

¹This uses the concept of the theatre as a metaphor to analyse how people interact in our everyday performances.

² For my purposes, structure will be assumed as a given, whether it is the architectural frame or the human body. Cladding will allow discussion of drapery as used at windows, doors, floors and walls. Upholstery and upholstered furniture with its emphasis on form will relate to women's garments that also have their own emphasis on form and textile choice as appropriate in terms of dress and furnishing.

³ This dichotomy is not useful as there is always ambiguity. This dichotomy of the unknowing reflects Derrida's approach to the 'undecidable' where the dichotomy of say, concealing and revealing, reserved and obtrusive, etc., shows that any meaning is fluid, that there are no absolutes.

See also Alla Myzelev, John Potvin (eds.), *Fashion, Interior Design and the Contours of Modern Identity*, Surrey: Ashgate, 2010. 9Robin Evans introduced this term. See his *Figures, Doors, and Passages* and *The Developed Surface. An Enquiry into the Brief Life of an Eighteenth-Century Drawing Technique*, in: *Translations from Drawing to Building and Other Essays*, London: Architectural Association, 1997, pp. 153-232. One recent example is Diana Fuss's innovative exploration of the relation between the interior and the actual space in which authors such as Emily Dickinson, Marcel Proust, and Sigmund Freud lived and worked. See Diana Fuss, *The Sense of an Interior. Four Writers and the Rooms that Shaped Them*, New York, NY: Routledge, 2004. John Potvin and Alla Myzelev (eds), *Material Cultures, 1740-1920; The Meanings and Pleasures of Collecting*, Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2009, hardback, £55, pp.250. The working title for this book was *Collecting Subjects in Britain, 1700-1914: The Visual Meanings and Pleasures of Material Culture*, and perhaps that better reflected its ambitious aims and wide-ranging contents. Elizabeth Kramer's sophisticated history of the fashionable deployment of Japanese textiles in the British Victorian interior uses advice literature and case studies of collectors to challenge accepted binaries of taste across class and gender.