In March 1863, on the occasion of the wedding of the Prince of Wales to Princess Alexandra of Denmark, the Penny Illustrated Paper described the behaviour of the crowds who were packed on to the streets of London to take part in the celebrations. In certain areas, they reported, the crowds were so dense that a number of women devised a highly practical solution; they slipped off their crinolines and abandoned them in the streets. When the crowds dispersed, the voluminous petticoats were found littering the pavements and, the newspaper continued, if their original owners came forward, certain gentlemen were now offering to restore the discarded crinolines free of charge.

I like this story a lot; I like the image of Victorian city life that it presents. It evokes an image of humour and flirtation and of a relaxed informality between strangers on the streets and in the newspapers. It shows a lack of inhibition and self-consciousness about women’s dress, which is defined at once as attractive, impractical and erotic.

In the Museum of London, there is a small archive of unpublished letters, written from around 1840 to 1858. The pages are folded and re-folded into tiny squares and are frequently cross-written; the neat handwriting traversing the pages first horizontally, then vertically, weaving a fabric of news and gossip, a warp and weft of the everyday that transforms text into textile. The letters are written by a young woman called Amelia Roper, to her close friend, Martha Busher. Roper lived in Walthamstow, a residential suburb to the north-east of London; her friend lived south of London and then, later, in Warwickshire.

I have worked with these letters, on and off, for a number of years and they continue to fascinate me. Some are transcribed by the Museum, others are not, and a number are barely legible. Taken together, they offer compelling snatches of ordinary lives in the middle decades of the nineteenth century. The letters are a fascinating blend of formalised greetings and impatient transmission of gossip; of apologies and upbraiding for lapses in communication and chat about parties and visits to the theatre. And running like a thread through all of the correspondence is fashion; Amelia’s social life is made vivid by the descriptions of what she has worn, or plans to wear and how her clothes make her feel.

In 1857 she tells Martha about a forthcoming party:

I am going to wear the pink brocade Oh by the by I have got such a beautiful silk dress trimmed elegantly with deep fringe green you can form an idea from the enclosed bit; I wore it to Rebecca’s party, but I am afraid of spoiling it if I wear it too much. Miss Prior made it and I never had a dress to fit like it there is such style about it.

The mention of what she will wear to a party reminds her of another dress that she has worn on a previous occasion, she even sends a sample of the fabric to her friend for her to see and touch. Amelia loves the silk dress; in fact she loves it so much that she fears that she will wear it out. Perhaps it looked a little like one of the gowns reproduced that year in the American ‘queen of monthlies’, Godey’s Magazine and Lady’s Book; I am sure Amelia and other young women like her in Britain, France and the United States, pored over fashion plates such as these and imagined their stylish selves at parties and balls.

1857 was a busy year for Amelia; on 19th July she wrote to Martha full of news about a big night out at a theatre in central London:

Whatever do you think Mr & Miss Whittaker Fanny and I all went to the Olympic Theatre last Monday fortnight, and it was most lovely I cannot describe it to you I wished you could have been with us, they were all quite amused to see my ‘greeness’ I couldn’t keep from saying oh my! now and then it was most affecting in some of the parts. We went full dress I had a low body on, we felt quite screamers I can assure you...

The pleasure that Amelia feels at the theatre is deeply embodied; she does not just enjoy the performance, she
enjoys her reactions to the performance and her clothes are part of this bodily and phenomenological experience. Her dress makes her feel ‘a screamer’ – a slang term to describe someone outstanding, exceptional, a swell.


Clothes have this effect on Amelia again later that month; on 30th July she writes to Martha from Margate where she is on holiday. Writing that she has ‘a cartload of news for you’, she breaks off from the letter to get dressed for a visit that night to the Assembly Rooms, telling her friend: ‘I shall be too late if I don’t look out, I am going to wear the pink brocade and make myself as much of a screamer as I can, as there is such grand folks there that I shall not look conspicuous.’

As the reader has the pleasure of getting to know Amelia in her letters, they cannot help feeling that she does not mind in the least looking conspicuous and that she dresses for that effect and for the fun that she has when she wears these clothes.

Taken together, the incident on the night of the Prince of Wales’s wedding and the letters of Amelia Roper begin to construct an image of women’s fashionable dress in the late-1850s and early-1860s, in other words, in the age of the crinoline, as a source of fun and an opportunity for a playful interrogation of feminine identities. The history of fashionable dress in the nineteenth century is not simply a narrative of stylistic change or evolution, to which we attach moral approval or censure. Fashion is an embodied, phenomenological practice that draws distinctions of gender, class, age and status and that can express assertion and subversion, as much as docility or submission. As seen in my two opening examples, dress in the nineteenth century played a significant part in the performance of femininity that, in many ways, departs from conventional and conservative images of respectable Victorian womanhood. It gave women access to a bodily language that involved imaginative projection and fantasy: of women being reunited with discarded crinolines, or dressing to stand out in the crowd and to display a daring ostentation. Like the layers of clothes and folds of fabric, the pleasures of fashionable dress for the women who wore it and the women who write about it today, are multiple and sensual, involving sight, sound and above all, touch.

SLIDE: Franz Winterhalter, Empress Eugénie Surrounded by Her Ladies in Waiting, 1855

In this paper, I am going to look at the relationships between pleasure, the senses and the crinoline and then examine one painting in detail, Franz Winterhalter’s 1855 group portrait of Empress Eugénie Surrounded by Her Ladies in Waiting. In this work, and in others that show women in high fashion in this period, the surface of the canvas and the layers of the costume share a textural haptic visuality, that is, they create a kind of looking that stimulates the pleasures of touching and feeling.

Layer One: Theories of Pleasure
How do we write histories of humour, fun and pleasure? How do we know them when we see them, let alone understand their social and cultural significance? How can we describe pleasure without deadening it or rendering it joyless and what about finding pleasure when there was none?

Pleasure has traditionally seemed to be the neglected category of cultural and historical analysis; however, in the last thirty years or so, in the aftermath of poststructuralism, pleasure has also become the object of philosophical and social investigation. Writers such as Fredric Jameson, Nicholas Royle and Steven Connor have explored the social management of pleasure and the potential for creating new subversive forms of pleasure. They have argued against the conventional perception of pleasure as ‘simply hedonistic or self-indulgent’ and have sought to redefine the relationship between pleasure, subjectivity and political radicalism. For these literary theorists, pleasure is not simply a subject of the text, but is the text itself, an effect of reading or, indeed, of looking. And the pleasure of the text is also an erotic pleasure, since the text, it is argued, is always concerned to seduce its readers.

The seductive power of the text was elaborated by Roland Barthes in The Pleasure of the Text (1973), in which he differentiated the text of pleasure that is comfortable and conforming and the text of bliss or jouissance, which discomforts and unsettles identity; where pleasure centres the reader, jouissance, goes beyond aesthetic and psychical limits and creates a space of political subversion. Within this formulation, pleasure is the poor, manipulated relative of bliss. Defined as a tool of social and psychic management, we have become more alert to the dangers of pleasure than to the pleasures of pleasure. For Connor, there is also a bifurcation in theories of aesthetic pleasure between those who disapprove of it and those for whom it is the overriding aim of culture; a division, in Connor’s words, ‘between a hedonistic and a moralistic view of pleasure.’

But does jouissance describe the feelings that Amelia Roper experienced when she dressed for a party? The concept seems entirely inappropriate to me. She is seduced by damask and silk; she plays with and subverts some aspects of female identity, but I want to find a more subtle and lighter understanding of her pleasure that mirrors the textures and layers of muslin, tulle and chiffon that created the dresses of the period. This will involve reintroducing the body and the pleasures of touch and ways of looking that evoke these pleasures in the
viewer. Fashion was part of women’s imaginative and sensual world in the mid-nineteenth century and the crinoline, in particular, was poised between being a sign of female passivity and a sign of physical presence, between slavery and embodied pleasure.

Layer Two – The Crinoline

SLIDE: fashion plate from Godey’s Magazine, 1860 (with half figures in upper section)

During the 1850s dresses became bigger and more ornate; skirts grew wider and wider, devouring metres of fabric and decorated with flounces, fringes and ribbons.

SLIDE: bodice of dress, 1855-7, V&A

The style was facilitated by the development of the sewing machine and technological developments in textile production that introduced new machine-made light, gauzy fabrics such as tulle and tafatlan, which supplemented the more established silks and taffetas and were more suited to the purses of Amelia Roper and her friends of the middling classes. The key to this fashion, the frame for this confection of fabrics and ornament, was the hoop or cage crinoline.

SLIDE: crinoline cage, c.1860, V&A

As the circumferences of skirts grew in the 1850s, they required increasing numbers of petticoats in order to support them and give the dresses their distinctive dome shape. These layers of undergarments were made of horsehair, stuffed pads and stiffened petticoats and were hot, heavy and unhygienic. In 1856 a patent was taken out for a ‘cage’ petticoat, made of graduated spring steel hoops, suspended on cotton tapes. Essentially a device on which to hang expensive draperies, the cage crinoline did away with the layers of heavy petticoats that had hitherto been worn. Innovations in the design of the crinoline quickly followed; it became more flexible and, with the addition of flounces at the hem, a more natural and less mechanical look was soon achieved.

SLIDE: Thomson’s crinoline factory, c. 1860

The largest manufacturer of crinolines was Thomson’s, who, at the height of the crinoline fashion, employed over 1000 women in their London factory, producing three to four thousand crinolines a day, which were sold in Britain and exported overseas.

SLIDE: Edward Philpott, ‘Sansflectum Crinolines’, from Crinoline from 1730 to 1864, 1864

By 1864, towards the end of the age of the crinoline, Edward Philpott, the manufacturer of the ‘Sansflectum Crinoline’, was advertising that his garment allowed the dress to fall in ‘graceful’ folds, resume their original shape if pressed out of it and make no ‘creaking or rattling.’ The crinoline was a fashion of paradoxes: of Sheffield steel rolled out to give the impression of natural folds of fabric; of volume but the absence of mass; of spatial expanse constructed on insubstantiality. The paradoxical nature of the crinoline is found in the etymology of the word, the Oxford English Dictionary gives its derivation from the French words for the original stiff horsehair petticoats and its adaptation to describe the later hoop frameworks. It also gives a usage from the 1870s as a form of naval defence: ‘a netting fitted round war-ships as a defence against torpedoes.’ It is worth bearing in mind this later definition and the image of the crinoline as a barrier, a form of defence against attack; it begins to suggest why the crinoline so quickly became an object of ridicule and how historians may reassess the fashion now.

Satirical cartoons began to appear almost as soon as the fashion itself.

SLIDE: Punch, August 1856

Along with many other illustrated journals, Punch published hundreds of articles and images sending up the crinoline and waged a particularly vitriolic campaign against the fashion, ridiculing its size, its inconvenience and the women who wore it. The first cartoons represented the crinoline as a sartorial deception that distorted and disguised women’s natural shape; the cutaway image from August 1856 takes the form of a comparative ‘as she is’ and ‘as she appears’; with the crinoline the foundation for the deceit. By the following year, the inconvenience and spatial imposition of the fashion was the main butt of satirical humour:

SLIDE: ‘Cool Request’, Punch, January 1857

In ‘Cool Request’, a woman in a large crinoline, asks her male companion to take an outside seat on a snowy day because the carriage cannot accommodate them both.

No medium could resist the visual humour of the crinoline in the second half of the 1850s. It appeared in illustrated books and prints.

SLIDE: ‘Omnibus Accidents’, c.1859
And in 1858, Cupid and Crinoline told the comic story of the love affair of Adolphus and Kitty, in which the crinoline thwarts the suitor’s attempts to woo his sweetheart. Photography also got in on the act. In fact, the mania that Punch termed ‘crinolinomania’ seemed to be a condition afflicting the satirists as much as the wearers of the fashion. The daily and weekly press was full of leaders, articles and letters from Paterfamilias attacking the crinoline and its vain and self-indulgent followers. Given the extent of the published vitriol, the question may be put in a straightforward and possibly provocative way: why did men hate crinolines so much?

This can be answered firstly in terms of health and safety; crinolines were a fire hazard. Week after week stories of women burnt to death when their crinolines caught fire were reported in the newspapers; in October 1861 the Guardian reprinted an article sub-titled: ‘Crinoline: A Real Social Evil’. Claiming that it was responsible for more deaths than any other fashion (it is not clear how many mortalities other fashions had caused), it blamed the crinoline for impoverishing respectable households, corrupting the morals of the working classes and causing death by disembowelling (by wounds from broken steel springs), drownings, crushings and burnings.

The second reason that men hated crinolines was because of their volume. Within a discourse of scale and propriety, the crinoline represented excess, its expansive layers an ostentatious display of extravagant consumption. Women in crinolines took up too much room, they invaded men’s space and they swept them off the pavement with their enormous girth.

Looking back in 1926 at her years in the French Court of Empress Eugénie, Comtesse de Mercy-Argenteau observed:

"The ample, even ridiculously ample skirt has always coincided with the greatest power of woman. In the periods of history where woman was all powerful you find the crinoline."

It is easy to dismiss this simple equation of size and power, but within the critique of the crinoline there is a strong sense that women have become too big, that they have lost their sense of scale and gone beyond their natural boundaries. Moreover, their physical presence is also a question of styles of movement; women walk differently in a crinoline, their bodies assume a kind of sway that accommodates the motion of the hoops. Described by a Victorian critic as ‘the waddle of the stout woman of fifty’, the gait also tended to reveal ankles and stockings as the crinoline zigzagged from side to side.

Posture, length of stride, bearing of head became part of the external behaviour and deportment of the woman in crinoline and this new style of motion was enhanced and animated by the addition of fringes and ornamentation.

It is a complex, overdetermined way of being in and experiencing the world and it confounds easy categorisation.

The sexual politics of the crinoline are equally multi-layered. Within feminism, it is has traditionally been seen as a symbol of the Victorian woman’s domestic enslavement and submissiveness. In her novel Orlando, first published in 1928, Virginia Woolf describes the crinoline, along with the grey, wet weather, as the symbol of the repressive Victorian age: '[Orlando] stood mournfully at the drawing-room window...dragged down by the weight of the crinoline which she had submissively adopted. It was heavier and more drab than any dress she had yet worn. None had ever so impeded her movements.’ Feminist historiography has since adopted this approach, most memorably in Helene E. Roberts’s 1977 formulation of the ‘exquisite slave’, in which clothes articulate conservative Victorian gender roles:

"Men were serious (they wore dark colors and little ornamentation), women..."
were frivolous (they wore light pastel colors, ribbons, lace and bows); men were active (their clothes allowed them movement), women inactive (their clothes inhibited movement)…'

and so on. Fashion traps women; the cage crinoline is literally a prison that captivates women in repressive gender roles. There is absolutely no room here for an analysis of female, let alone feminist pleasure. If Victorian women choose the crinoline, it is because they are dictated by couturiers and are obsessed with mindless, irrational dreams.

Roberts’s essay was, notoriously, responded to by the cultural historian David Kunzle, who was at that time completing his own study of Fashion and Fetishism. Focussing on the use of the corset and the practice of tight-lacing, Kunzle argued that, rather than being slaves to patriarchal culture, these women were subverting cultural norms, defying medical and moral authority, and asserting their own self-conscious identities. Extremes of fashion, he argued, were a source of narcissistic, erotic pleasure, and it was this that resulted in the opprobrium expressed in the popular press.

No pleasure or all pleasure; we have here a reductive binary of the kind that Steven Connor described in his account of the hedonistic and moralistic views of pleasure and neither can account for the fun that women had with clothes, when they wrote to absent friends or took off their crinolines in crowded streets.

Layer Three – Fashion and Modernity

When critics accused wearers of the crinoline of succumbing to the dictates of fashion, they were to a very great extent, correct. In the middle of the nineteenth century, fashion was in the process of becoming the system of seasonal change and conspicuous consumption with which we are now all familiar and by the 1850s, the ephemeral qualities of high fashion, its constant search for novelty, its transitory and contingent nature could be seized on by the cultural vanguard as a symbol of the spirit of modern life. Whereas men’s dress codes were seen to be relatively static and uniform, women’s clothes were constantly changing, in line with the temporality of modern life itself.

Clothes, as we have seen, however, are complex signs and do not always behave in the ways that we expect them to; they might be an expression of the pace of the present, but they also involve the body and are a bodily practice. The dressed body is a ‘phenomenological entity’ that can evoke memories and the past, as much as the constant change of the present. As we saw in the letters of Amelia Roper, clothes can be the prompts for remembering moments in our past; we recollect our history through what we were wearing. Time, history and memory are all folded into the meaning of clothes in the nineteenth century and there is a sense of loss, a melancholic sadness in the certainty that even the most fashionable clothes will be ‘out of fashion’. The sartorial is thus a metaphor not only for the accelerated temporality of modernity, but also its folding of history, memory and time passing.

SLIDE: Fashion plate from Modes de Paris, 1858

For Charles Baudelaire, fashion plates are modernity’s archive, the purest expression of the moral and aesthetic feelings of their age. But how much more expressive are the women dressed in these clothes: ‘Living flesh’, Baudelaire writes ‘imparted a flowing movement to what seems to us too stiff.’ The Painter of Modern Life, first published in instalments in the Figaro in 1863, at the height of the crinoline craze, is a lyrical taxonomy of women and fashion. Described as works of art, statues on pedestals and portraits in frames, fashionable women represent both the most civilized and the most Protean aspects of modern life, the evil of modern beauty and its moral ambiguity. He describes the courtesan in her crinoline: She advances towards us, glides, dances, or moves about with her burden of embroidered petticoats, which play the part at once of pedestal and balancing rod; her eyes flash out from under her hat, like a portrait in its frame. She is the perfect image of the savagery that lurks in the midst of civilization.

The image of the crinolined woman as a modern work of art that could rival the ancients was also taken up by Théophile Gautier in his book, De la mode, published in 1858, in which he described how: That mass of rich fabric makes a pedestal for bust and head...if I am permitted a mythological approach to such a modern question, we could say that the woman in her ball gown conforms to the ancient Olympian etiquette.

For Baudelaire and Gautier the crinoline symbolises the luxury and consumption of the Second Empire; placed at the centre of a confection of steel petticoats and modern fabrics, the woman’s body appears as though on a pedestal. She glides rather than walks, caught in the tension between the eternally new and the inevitably forgotten.

Layer 4 – Painting Pleasure

SLIDE: Franz Winterhalter, Empress Eugénie Surrounded by Her Ladies in Waiting, 1855
Empress Eugénie Surrounded by Her Ladies in Waiting is a large, almost life-size painting. Nine women from the French court sit in a pastoral setting; gorgeously dressed, they look like an arrangement of the flowers that they gather around them. The group is arranged in a circle that is entwined and punctuated by their spreading dresses; layers of subtly contrasting shades and textures that form hills of tulle, satin and lace. The group seem relaxed and informal, brought together only by the pleasure of the moment; in fact, however, the composition articulates an emphatic and necessary social hierarchy. The figure at the top and to the left of the centre of the canvas, with lilacs in her hair and wearing a dress of white silk, overlaid with tulle and threaded with lilac ribbon, is the Empress Eugénie. On either side of her are the two most senior of her ladies in waiting; on her right, the Grande Maîtresse, in pink taffeta, and on her left, dressed in a deep red dress with black Chantilly lace, is her Dame d'Honneur. Grouped around these three women are the Dames du Palais: in the centre foreground, the Marquise de Montebello wears a tiered gown of green taffeta, trimmed at the shoulders with white lace and to her right, the Marquise de la Tour Maubourg stands in a dark blue silk dress, decorated with tiers of black lace, holding a straw hat, trimmed with flowers and a white tulle train.

Each of the women can be identified and the elements of their gorgeous clothing described in detail; but such a narrative cannot begin to capture the texturality and complexity of the image; the passages where the individuality of the figures dissolves into so many layers of painted pleasure:

SLIDE: Winterhalter, Empress Eugénie, det. of hat and ribbon

where the tulle on the Marquise’s straw hat takes on a life of its own and forms a river of gauze at the bottom of the canvas; or where the puffed and primped dresses fuse into a cloud bank of light textures.

SLIDE: Winterhalter, Empress Eugénie, det. with five figures

It cannot evoke the compression and pressure of the dresses, the points where crinolines are pushed against each other, or where a white arm sinks into layers of fabric and petticoat.

SLIDE: Winterhalter, Empress Eugénie, det. arm in dress

It is an image that manages to convey both volume and insubstantiality, a fête champêtre for an age of empire.

The painting was exhibited at the Universal Exposition in Paris in 1855, in the ‘Palace of Industry’, which also contained a display of French fashions, including dresses, gloves and jewellery. It was a popular success at the Exposition, where it was awarded a first class medal; the critical response was more equivocal, however. Although the strict codes of censorship introduced by Louis-Napoleon limited how negative the critics could be, a number of them felt that the painting was as light-weight and decorative as the dresses, or the court itself. The picture continued to fascinate audiences at exhibitions; in 1856 it was exhibited in Vienna, where it was so popular that tickets had to be issued in order to control the crowds. After that time, the painting was withdrawn from public display and became part of Louis Napoleon’s private art collection. The image of Eugénie that the painting created, however, continued to be disseminated in the public imagination; in 1867 an English journalist described the Empress with her ladies-in-waiting at a ball as ‘the prettiest picture – a Winterhalter it should have been.’

SLIDE: Winterhalter, Queen Victoria and her Cousin the Duchess of Nemours, 1852, Royal Collection

By the time that he painted Eugénie’s group portrait, Franz Xavier Winterhalter had become the foremost painter of the courts of Europe. Beginning with patronage from Louis-Philippe in the 1830s, he went on to gain regular commissions and awards from the royal houses of Belgium and Great Britain. Executing over one hundred works in oil for Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, it is likely that he called on the help of studio assistants in parts of the paintings such as dresses and accessories. I like the fact that we cannot be certain who painted the glowing sensual draperies in Empress Eugénie’s picture; it adds to the layers of pleasure to imagine an unknown hand working on these passages of the canvas.

SLIDE: Winterhalter, Empress Eugénie

Winterhalter was in this period like a court jeweller; decorating and enhancing the glamour and power of the courts of Europe. The Second Empire of Louis Napoleon, in particular, was associated with the world of luxury goods, leisure and distractions. The court was notorious for its splendour, an image that was intended to recall and rival the opulence of the court of Napoleon I. Eugénie played a critical role in propagating this image of the Imperial court; famously glamorous and fashionable, she was known as the ‘Reine Crinoline’. In England she was attributed with introducing the crinoline style and following the 1855 exhibition, copies of her dresses were being sold throughout Europe. The image of floating, ethereal mists of chiffon and tulle thus articulate something much more concrete and substantial; like the steel hoops of the crinoline itself, the economic and political power of European monarchy and empire is what supports the dreamlike layers of expensive fabric.

The painting was clearly of great importance to the Empress. It hung in a suite of rooms at the palace of
Fontainebleau that have been described as ‘a sphere of pleasure’, dedicated to court ritual and entertainment.

SLIDE: The Grand Salon at Fontainebleau

With a smoking room and a billiard room, the four principal rooms included the Grand Salon and the Musée Chinois, which housed a collection of objects that had been seized by the French during military and trade campaigns in China. By the 1860s the painting hung in an ante room next to the Grand Salon, opposite the onyx and silver statue of an Arab Woman by Charles Cordier.

SLIDE: Charles Cordier, Arab Woman, 1862

This might all seem far from the world of Amelia Roper, dressing for the theatre in London or the assembly rooms in Margate, but when she put on her best dress and felt like a ‘screamer’, it was because the clothes gave her the vicarious pleasure of being as grand as an Empress!

SLIDE: Winterhalter, Empress Eugénie

After the fall of the Second Empire, Eugénie went into exile in England; the French state gave her the group portrait and in 1880, when she bought Farnborough Hill, a mansion just outside London, it hung in the entrance hall and was the first image to greet visitors until her death in 1927. The painting was a memorial to the halcyon days of the Second Empire and to the pleasure and beauty of the Bonaparte dynasty.

Pleasure and feeling run deeply through the painted layers of Winterhalter’s picture. The layers of fabric and decoration defy the flatness of the canvas; coats of paint are layered like cloth and both oil paint and dress fashion the surface of the picture. The deep working of the surface evokes the stiffness, the itchiness of the stiffened lace and flounces, the lightness and translucency of chiffons and the smooth coldness of silk. The crinoline petticoats and their compressed folds cover the canvas with areas that are visible, folded or hidden; how strange that where satire insisted on the distancing effects of the crinoline, here the women seem drawn by their clothes into a close, intimate and feminine group. To rework the words of film historian, Giuliana Bruno, it is a picture of pure atmosphere, haunted by the very spirit of fashion.

Fashion is thus a form of intimate contact between bodies; the threads of the fabric carry the imprint of the body like a shroud and bear the traces of lives and memories that can be recalled in the weave of canvas and layers of paint. The pleasures of looking at this picture are haptic, that is, they derive from the sense of touch that is aroused by the gaze. The eye of the viewer is drawn towards the fabrics and texture of the dresses, following the folds, creases and rumples of clothes. We do not touch the canvas, but we feel the pressure of skin on fabric, of fabric on fabric, of skin on skin. This is how, within the constraints of its own medium, painting uses vision as if it were the sense of touch. Where optic vision explores the image at a distance, as though in deep space, haptic visuality collapses the distance between the viewer and the image and focuses on surface, using texture to appeal to memory and a tactile consciousness. As Laura Marks writes in her book The Skin of the Film, haptic visuality invites a ‘small, caressing gaze…[the] eye lingers over innumerable surface effects instead of being pulled into centralized structures.’ This is the act of viewing Winterhalter’s painting of Empress Eugénie; the eye is constantly drawn from the group into the intimate, fibrous passages of fabric and decoration. The complexity of the textures stimulates a corporeal and emotional contemplation that is woven into the canvas.

The painted costumes create a mood, a mental atmosphere that mirrors the effects of clothes themselves. We remember moments from our own past through our clothes, which can fold the past back into the present in an especially vivid way. As we fumble through the receding layers of silk and tulle, the tiers of lace and ribbon, like the wings of stage scenery, we seem to reach back in time as well as space. Time is in this painting as surely as space and texture: how long did it take for these women to dress? How long have they been seated together? How long will they remain? Remember that day, that sitting, that dress. There is a sadness and a loss, in this painting; the moment of these fashionable clothes, like all fashion, is inevitably in the past, a metaphor for the construction of history and memory. Time and longing exist in the painting in the spaces between the folds of piled up and compacted skirts, perhaps this is why Eugénie had the painting near her when she lived those long years of exile in England.

SLIDE: Eugénie towards the end of her life at Farnborough, photo.

Her haptic, longing gaze could reach into the folds and textures of the painting and rediscover the moment, the being there in that place and time. Engaging in this tactile relationship with the surface of the image, she gives herself up to pleasure and desire.

Abandoned crinolines, pink brocade dresses and the painting of an Empress; preparing for this lecture has allowed me to look below the surface of Victorian satire and fashion and see the layers of pleasure involved for women in the matter of fashionable dress. At times exhilarating, it could also be physically and emotionally painful, but it did not turn women into slaves or hedonists but gave them a space, between the folds, to explore desire and identity.