

BALENCIAGA / THE LOST TAPE

PARIS — A chill was in the air as we stumbled through the entrance, trying not to get crushed or stepped on. Students were practically climbing over the fenced-off area (either that or they must have snuck in the night before and just slept there, hoping no one would find them). Photographers too were jostling. I sometimes pity them, rushing from one show to the next, leaving assistants to guard their tripods for hours at a time and sometimes even overnight.

ELECTRIC ATMOSPHERE ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF PARIS WITH NAOMI CAMPBELL, ISABELLE HUPPERT, RENATA LITVINOVA, ESTHER CAÑADAS, AND SUSANNE BARTSCH

The atmosphere is electric. I am seated in the front row and facing me from across the aisle is the *New York Times* journalist, Cathy Horyn. The show takes place in a tent on the outskirts of Paris and around us, there are flashes everywhere. Photographers are going crazy over Naomi Campbell, Isabelle Huppert, Renata Litvinova, Esther Cañadas, and Susanne Bartsch. One rule is never to get in the way of the photographers, as you will surely be pushed aside.

In the pre-show whispers, I hear that the designer lives near a forest—maybe that is why the floor and the catwalk are made of dirt? When it's about to start, as usual the runway photographer Dan Lecca shouts to the front row guests, "Don't cross your legs." A young actress sitting next to me is trying to understand why you cannot cross your legs. She looks puzzled but the show goes on regardless: lights dim, music starts, and it begins.

The first model walks out and sets the tone: wire-framed glasses and a body-hugging top with low-waisted, long and lean, black leather belted Pantaboots. In fact, they look more like a pair of skinny jeans, the way the pockets are cut, riveted, and stitched. She walks fast—they all do—and sometimes if you spend too much time linger-

ing on the back details of one model, you miss the entrance of another.

The first of the puffer jackets comes out: this version has a detachable pillow collar that ingeniously hides a hood. I can imagine how useful this is on long trips—you just unfurl the hood and bingo! You are all set for sleep. But at Balenciaga, no one has been resting. Demna has brought the House back to life. Not only has he revived the disruptive nature of its founder, but he has also managed to transform a multitude of immaculately sculpted heritage pieces into beautifully crafted tailored suits, a continuum with cinched waists and rounded hips.

COUTURE TECHNIQUES CREATE EXQUISITE FORMS

Clearly, couture techniques were utilized to create these exquisite forms, and tailoring has always been the lifeblood of the House. In one, the raised neckline caresses the body as the jacket crosses over like a kimono, fixed at the waist. These suits, like cast forms, are not only for women, but men also—their version is double breasted with wide shoulders, pockets, and a slight curve at the hips. Cristóbal Balenciaga grew up in the Basque fishing village of Getaria, where he must have seen men in black rubber fishermen's boots. I am thinking that his spirit sparked an idea with Demna, who created his own interpretation of the classic, paired unexpectedly with blazers almost molded to the body.

The Balenciaga motorcycle jacket is re-cut, with broad shoulders, grommets, and a multitude of zips and pockets. Here it's styled with another variation on those fisherman boots, again climbing up the leg and now with the bottom half dipped in rubber.

This season, Demna delved into making his own stretch knits for the first time with fantasy threads to give the impression of tweed. I was curious. Talking to him after the show, I wanted to know why so many of the tweed looks were seemingly worn backwards. He said that he doesn't like "front closures," and he enjoys "turning things upside down and backwards." How Demna.

How perfect. From the front, the slim-fitting tweed knits look prim and softly austere on the runway, either just covering the knees or long to the floor in pale pink or cornfield yellow, with a round neck and bracelet-length sleeves hugging the body. These knits, which have been constructed to fit perfectly to the frame's contours, are deceptively simple: It's not just putting a dress on backwards, each has to be made so that it fits perfectly but gives the appearance of a carefree switch-around.

I wondered how to get in and out of the dresses made without any closures (the buttons in the back: decorative) and was informed that the stretchy knit allowed you to pull them over your head.

Black leather is a dominant theme in the collection and plenty of this is upcycled. It must be impossible to wear one of these broad-shouldered, floor-length black leather coats and not feel instantly powerful given their imposing outline. It has something military about its shape: shoulders are broad and slightly rounded, sleeves are wide and long. It is accompanied with the killer leather bag. This one has grommets leather straps that look like they could be used as a harness. Who knows, maybe they once were? At any rate, there are multiple straps that hang from the hardware at the shoulder, and it is a must-have.

THE SECRET OF THE HOUSE IS ALL ABOUT CONSTRUCTION, CUT AND TEXTILE

The black, blown up, zipped-front track suit jacket is major, cut from a mix of nylon and polyamide. It's not that Balenciaga has never proposed a track suit before, but never one quite like this. When you have a piece that becomes part of your signature, you must keep evolving it, refining and redefining until it reaches as close as it can to perfection. This is close. Like the father of the House, Cristóbal Balenciaga knew, it is important, when making a garment, to work with the space between the body and the fabric. By doing so, you create volumes. Therein lies the secret of the House. It's all about construction, cut, and textile.

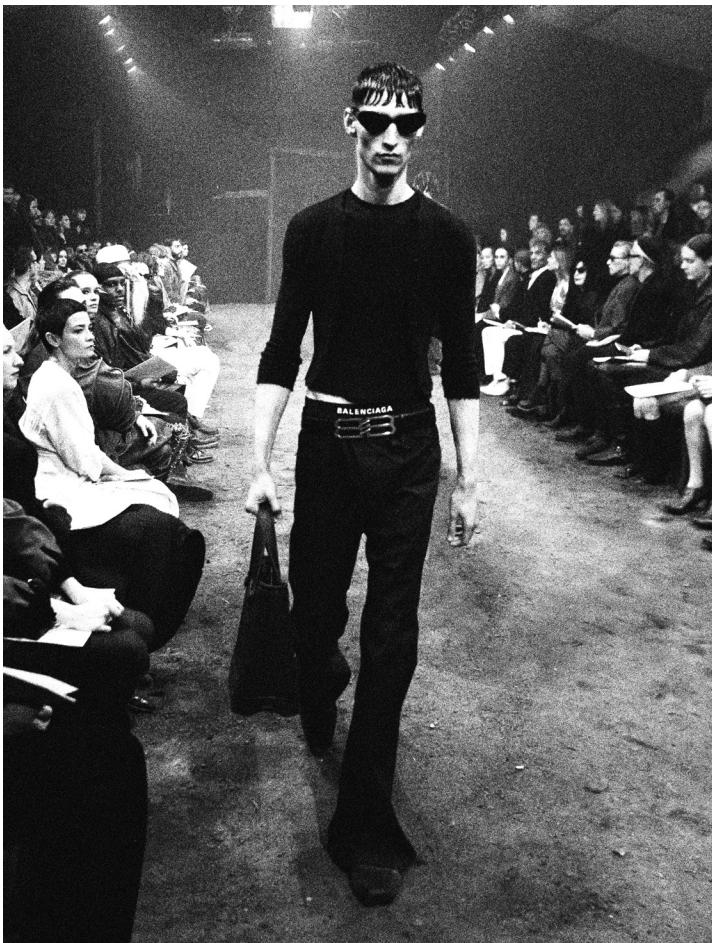
A few fake fur pieces jump out.

One is a short jacket with rounded shoulders and a high collar that wraps around the waist like a bathrobe. In fact, there are a variety of bathrobe-inspired looks in various textiles—one is a mix of nylon and polyamide, another is in terrycloth with a big, notched collar and extra-long raglan sleeves. Boots are everywhere and some are even connected to trousers. A denim pair of heels attach to a matching mini skirt so that when you put your trousers on, you are also stepping into your shoes. I am still trying to figure out how easy it would be to get out of them, especially after a night out.

In 1958, Cristóbal created the dress that would be called the "baby doll," inspired by children's clothing, with loose-fitting volumes that allow total freedom of movement. In this collection, Demna creates his own version for Balenciaga, however, his would be more at home on a punkish Courtney Love. Slip dresses are made from deconstructed jersey. Clearly the showstopper was the floor-length transparent dress with what appeared to be safety pins joining ruffles to the sheer skirt. More safety pins formed a bandeau crisscrossing the torso. The floor-length skirts were epic, too.

What the baby doll shows is that re-thinking classics and challenging techniques in construction seems to be a theme of the House. It is slipped over a pair of long-legged black leather boots, and the model carries this year's version of the saddle, the Metro Bag. Another model walks out in a narrow jacket exposing his chest, wearing slim trousers tucked into boots that go up his calf. Shoulders, again, are wide with a tuxedo lapel (slightly awkward, like wearing your boyfriend's jacket, but it works). An equally austere version is maximized: an oversized blazer over an equally roomy pair of trousers. Both looks express morality, albeit in extremely opposing volumes. Again, it is the thought process around their application and the play of skin and space (both versions are worn over a bare chest) that impresses. I wonder what that ever-present key pendant signifies.

The puffer jacket is a staple here and comes in a variety of silhouettes, some ending high on the hip and rounded in form, worn over a skinny athletic T-shirt that



features a small Balenciaga logo and ends three quarters down the torso, like it's a few sizes too small.

Body-hugging twin sets baring a bit of midriff are shown on men and the Balenciaga logo is the overall print. Another body-hugging top features a Balenciaga FASHION INSTITUTE logo and reveals a touch of skin above the large double-B hardware belt resting on slouchy, oversized trousers. It is a skinny top, big bottom look. And it works. A surprise look is the full-length puffer coat with a trapeze skirt and at the back an oversized bow that can transform into a puffed shawl—detachable of course.

HIGH DRAMA CONSTRUCTION
High drama is present, and much of it. My favorite: an asymmetrical sunburst-pleated collarless floor-length dress made out of warp and weft threads. The architect of its construction took on the challenge. An almost operatic cape crosses the torso with horizontal pleats over a pleated skirt. I could imagine it being worn by Maria Callas performing *Medea*.

Have you ever seen a leather kimono? Balenciaga has one made in heaven. A dropped shoulder coat

with kimono sleeves, a swing back, and ribbed leather trim crosses over itself and ties simply at the waist. It is shown over a long black skirt but is a forever jacket that would look exquisite over anything formal or casual.

Faux denim looks are faded and distressed. The classic jeans jacket is oversized, with an interesting new construction: dropped shoulders, enlarged sleeves, and an elongated torso. We are so used to seeing skinny jeans jackets, but the only thing skinny here is the tight V-neck T-shirt that reveals a hint of midriff—and the ever-present Balenciaga underwear. Trouser legs are shredded at the hem. A windowpane shirt is shrunken and worn over low-slung, oversized, pieced-together jeans with a very dropped crotch, a double-B hardware belt, a chain, and a perforated shopping tote.

At some point, the show ends. The crowd goes wild. The woman sitting next to me cannot stop whistling—she is good at it, too—and at one point turns to me and asks if I think she is too much. Of course not, it could never be too much. It's **BALENCIAGA**.

by DIANE PERNET