Fashion

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Fashion is a tangential concern to most academic disciplines; outside of historical costume studies there has been little sustained attention to the topic. When approached within a traditional discipline, fashion is usually slotted into a broader theoretical framework rather than addressed with any conceptual specificity. The relative paucity of research on fashion can be easily attributed to its association with femininity and trivial consumerism, but it is also a tremendously difficult object to define and analyze. Cultural studies of fashion have brought new life to the topic by looking beyond familiar notions that fashion is a manifestation of the marketplace, social stratification, erotic drives, or cultural zeitgeists. Cultural studies have begun to articulate the variety of questions one can ask about fashion: is it a set of social protocols, aesthetic discourses, or a nexus of culture industries? Is it a distinctively modern phenomenon or similar to traditionial uses of dress? I would argue that it is all of the above, but that each of these areas needs exploring in order to understand the complexity of the topic. This chapter offers a brief overview of some disciplinary approaches to fashion and an introduction to new insights offered by interdisciplinary cultural studies.

Is Fashion Modern?

Cultural studies of fashion have their roots in the 1970s work of the Birmingham Centre for Cultural Studies on youth subcultures, which sought to understand the resistive potential of marginalized cultural production with the help of theorists like Raymond Williams and Antonio Gramsci. More recently, cultural approaches to fashion have drawn on two primary theoretical influences: performance theory and social practice theory. Performance theory in its current form is indebted to Judith Butler's linguistics-derived model of the "citational" nature of social identity, as well as the work of Michel Foucault and the dramaturgical sociology of Erving Goffman. Social practice theory is drawn

primarily from the work of Pierre Bourdieu and has its roots in the anthropology of Marcel Mauss and Marshall Sahlins, among others. While I would argue that these two approaches to fashion are not incompatible, they focus on different aspects of fashion and are often used to define the topic very differently. Performance theory focuses on the link between fashion and modernity, and in particular the "self-fashioning" implied by each individual's participation in social role playing and identity construction (Finkelstein 1991). Social practice theory, on the other hand, sees less individual agency in the enactment of such roles, while recognizing that they exist because they are habitually readopted due to cultural constraints rather than determined or unchanging. Social practice theory is thus less concerned with the way modern (or postmodern) fashion is different from earlier forms of dress than with the ways that dress continues to function as an aspect of socialization.

The majority of fashion studies, however, have begun from the premise that fashion is a distinctively modern phenomenon that is fundamentally different from earlier uses of dress. Central to this argument is the idea that modern fashion is about novelty – the production of endless objects of minute differentiation and planned obsolescence. Early fashion theory contrasted the modern emphasis on change with the perceived stability of dress in premodern societies. In 1890, Gabriel de Tarde argued in his book *The Laws of Imitation* that in traditional societies dress serves to promote continuity with the past and the imitation of ancestors, while modern fashion promotes novelty and the imitation of contemporary innovators and exotic foreigners. Fashion historians have supported Tarde's notion that fashion represents a significant break with earlier uses of dress, noting that Europe in the fourteenth century saw clothing styles begin to change more frequently and reflect a wider range of influences than in earlier periods. These changes are attributed to the rise of modern states and a mobile bourgeoisie, and are seen to have produced a form of "aesthetic individualism" within court society. Fashion quickly became a sociopolitical tool for trend-setting aristocrats, rather than just a means of representing traditional status divisions (Lipovetsky 1994, Campbell 1987, Mukerji 1983, Breward, 1995). Social theorist Giles Lipovetsky concludes from these events that fourteenth-century Europe initiated a paradigm shift away from the traditional meaning of dress: "Clothing no longer belonged to collective memory; it became the singular reflection of the predilections of sovereigns and other powerful people" (Lipovetsky 1994: 34).

Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai has supported this argument, observing that "In general, all socially organized forms of consumption seem to revolve around some combination of the following three patterns: interdiction, sumptuary law, and fashion" (Appadurai 1996: 71). He points out that in small, "ritually oriented societies," rules about dress tend to be based on the culture's cosmology and are thus fairly static. Long-distance trade provokes changes in material culture, but new commodities appear relatively infrequently and are thus incorporated into existing value structures (Appadurai 1996: 71). Similarly, Lipovetsky argues that

while depictions of clothing in ancient Greece, Rome, Egypt, or Asia show variations of detail and arrangement, the basic elements of premodern dress changed very infrequently and variations were "predetermined by a closed set of possible combinations" rather than individual innovation (Lipovetsky 1994: 35). In 1930, J. C. Flügel described the difference between modern and pre-modern dress by arguing that non-Western dress tended to be more locally variable (as in tribal costume) but also more "permanent," while Western fashion was more uniform throughout its sphere of influence but changed far more rapidly than non-Western dress (Flügel 1950: 129–30).

From this perspective, fashion is defined as a system of conventions that requires both constant innovation and individual decision-making, and is thus specific to modern societies. Appadurai cautions, however, that while Europe may have experienced a shift in the mid-fourteenth century from sumptuary law to fashion, "what we need to avoid is the search for pre-established sequences of institutional change, axiomatically defined as constitutive of the consumer revolution . . . [so that] the rest of the world will not simply be seen as repeating, or imitating, the conjunctural precedents of England or France" (Appadurai 1996: 72–3). In other words, if fashion is specific to modern consumer culture, it may be so in a wide variety of culturally and historically distinct ways.

This definition of fashion sees the shift from imitating the past to imitating contemporaries of high status as a step towards increasing autonomy and individualism in dress: "the beginning of the right of personalization" (Lipovetsky 1994: 37). The association of fashion with relative individual autonomy is supported by the failure of the sumptuary laws of the middle ages to prevent the European bourgeoisie from wearing the fabrics, colors, and style of the aristocracy (Hunt 1996). Fashion has thus come to be seen as a tool of capitalist social mobility, inscribing group affiliation on a more voluntary level than previously possible. Paradoxically, however, fashion reinforces the role of dress to signify status and social distinction while also making those signs more appropriable. For this reason, sociological studies of fashion have focused almost exclusively on the role of fashion in displaying social status and facilitating upward mobility through the imitation of elites.

But recent theories of comsumer culture have looked at fashion and seen more than the functionalism of Thorstein Veblen's "conspicuous consumption." Appadurai agues, along with Colin Campbell and Chris Rojek, that the key to modern forms of consumerism is pleasure (Appadurai 1996: 83, Campbell 1987, Rojek 1987). This argument takes up where Max Weber leaves off, suggesting that what moderns crave is not hard-earned leisure but rather the ephemerality of fashion and its rejection of utility. In particular, fashion offers the pleasure of seeing the social self as malleable and open to constant reinvention. The argument that fashion is exclusively modern thus emphasizes the performative aspect of modern subjectivity and the "ambiguity and indeterminacy" it allows (Morris 1995: 567). It sees fashion as a corollary to the instability of modern social identity and its "logic of indetermination," which allows for a historically

unprecedented degree of individual agency in communicating social and personal characteristics (Lipovetsky 1994: 77–9).

There are, however, a number of arguments against making a category distinction between premodern dress and modern fashion. Without diminishing the importance of modern identity and consumerism to the meaning of fashion, one can point to some significant continuities between the traditional and modern meanings of dress. For example, anthropologists draw attention to the traditional use of clothing to indicate gender, age, group identity, and rank, as well as to modify behavior. Each of these functions still applies in modern fashion culture, in spite of increased choice in group affiliation and the relative indetermination of social castes. In other words, there is continuity in the most basic meanings of dress even though the social constraints associated with them have changed significantly. For example, Jennifer Craik draws on the concepts of anthropologist Marcel Mauss to argue that although modern fashion is peculiar in its emphasis on planned obsolescence and arbitrary design innovations, in everyday life it is still a "body technique" – a term coined by Mauss in the context of premodern societies. According to Mauss, body techniques are forms of self-presentation that individuals copy from members of their social group who are deemed behavioral models (Craik 1994: 9; Mauss 1973: 73–5). This reiteration of norms (which Mauss called "prestigious imitation") helps define the basic rules or "habitus" of a particular community and the way it circumscribes individuality.

This definition downplays the importance of fashion's shift away from traditional sources, arguing that regardless of its trendiness, modern "self-fashioning" still takes place within and is structured by a social habitus. Craik's position draws on social practice theory, seeing the fashion system as simply "custom in the guise of departure from custom" (Sapir 1931: 140; Bourdieu 1990, de Certeau 1984, Sahlins 1976). Accordingly, modern fashion in everyday life has much in common with premodern uses of dress, since it is both diverse (across social groups) and restrictive (based on the reiteration of social norms). Craik concludes that "in this sense, fashion is a technology of civility, that is, sanctioned codes of conduct in the practices of self-formation and self-presentation" (Craik 1994: 5). She acknowledges, however, that in modern cultures "there is a tension between unstructured and untrained impulses (license and freedom) and structured and disciplined codes of conduct (rule-bound, deliberate) in the dynamic creation of declarations of the limits of the habitus of the body" (Craik 1994: 5).

The challenge for cultural studies of fashion is to address this tension between fashion as a normative set of rules *and* as a tool of individuation and selective group-identification. For some time this tension was addressed primarily in terms of fashion's relationship to ideology and questions of structure versus agency. The legacy of the Frankfurt School has led most Marxist scholars to align fashion with other culture industries in a top-down model of commodity aesthetics. Within the Frankfurt model, dominant culture was seen to determine

both fashion norms and the pseudo-individuation of fashion iconoclasts (Haug 1987, Ewen 1976). With the influence of poststructuralism, however, resistance to dominant culture in the form of subcultural style gained legitimacy as a form of political resistance and social formation (Hebdidge 1979, McRobbie 1988). More recently, ethnographic research methods have informed such user-centered approaches, demonstrating how complex and negotiated people's relationships to fashion can be (Craig 1997).

In addition, recent work on consumerism and material culture has questioned the foundations of Marx's theory of commodity fetishism, arguing that the social value of goods is not only tied to labor value, but to the broader "social life of things" (Appadurai 1996, Miller 1987; Frow 1997: 102–217). This means that marketplace exchange does not simply mystify the value of commodities, but instead places them in a complex arena of resocialization. This focus on the reception and use of objects does not negate the importance of the political economy of their production; it would be impossible, for example, to adequately describe contemporary fashion without an account of the labor conditions, corporate structure, and marketing apparatus that make it possible. Nevertheless, the dual nature of fashion makes it, as Don Slater has described consumerism more generally, "a privileged site of autonomy, meaning, subjectivity, privacy and freedom" and simultaneously a site of "strategic action by dominating institutions" (Slater 1997: 31).

Fashion and Anthropology

Anthropologists were for years almost alone in acknowledging the wide range of social meanings attached to dress. Initially, however, it was fitted into a universalist concept of human development and "psychic unity," marked by stages of development from "savagery to barbarism to civilization" (El Guindi 1999: 50). This evolutionary model described a trajectory from simple body ornamentation, protection, and concealment to more "civilized" forms of dress, and sought to identify each stage of development (Crawley 1931: 77, 22; cited in El Guindi). This universal evolution model was abandoned, but some anthropologists have maintained a tendency to describe the relationship between traditional dress and introduced commodity fashions as one of "contamination" rather than as a constitutive dynamic of culture (Miller 1995: 265).

Among the most significant anthropological contributions to fashion studies was Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood's 1996 study *The World of Goods*. Though not concerned with fashion *per se*, the book challenged a basic premise of mainstream theories of consumerism: that consumption decisions are about the individual selection and purchase of goods. Douglas and Isherwood argued that consumption is tied to collective values and the social "use of material possessions that is beyond commerce" (Douglas & Isherwood 1996: 37). In doing so they both legitimized the study of consumer goods as material culture

and made that project more coherent by erasing the division between cultures with and without commerce (Miller 1995: 266–7). Subsequently, research on dress by anthropologists like Joanne Eicher and others has given "coherence to the data scattered throughout the literature and order to the various attempts to include dress in conceptualizations of culture and society" (EI Guindi 1999: 55; Barnes & Eicher 1992, Eicher 1995). Recent work, such as Fadwa EI Guindi's book on the complex meaning of the veil in contemporary Islamic cultures, combines the methodological rigor of anthropology with the political and theoretical reflexivity of cultural studies.

Fashion and Sociology

> Clothes for climbing, or what to wear on your way up the ladder; to build that graciousness which leads first to charm and eventually to financial advancement, proper, attractive clothes are a sound investment. (Clothing advertisement cited in Barber and Lobel 1961: 326)

The field of sociology has made a primary contribution to fashion studies, beginning with the seminal work of Gabriel de Tarde (1890), Thorstein Veblen (1899), and Georg Simmel (1904). As noted above, Tarde's work emphasized the break between traditional dress and modern fashion, arguing that fashion arises from a fluid social system in which tradition has less importance than the present behavior of highly regarded individuals or groups. Most early sociological studies thus assumed that fashion trends originated in the upper classes and were then copied by others in a competitive form of economic status display. It's worth nothing that Veblen wrote his well-known critique of "conspicuous consumption" at a moment in the rise of an American consumer economy when social theorists were searching for "some means of organizing and controlling the chaotic potential of the proliferating meanings attached to commodities" (Lears 1989: 85). Jackson Lears argues that Veblen's work was informed by factors like the sudden increase of wealth among American elites, immigration from non-Protestant traditions of "ritual and carnivalesque display," and the new "commercial theatricality" of department stores (Lears 1989: 85).

Simmel, on the other hand, was less anxious about the wasteful and competitive nature of fashion than Veblen and more interested in its role in adapting individuals to the demands of modernity. Simmel echoed Veblen in his chase-and-flight account of fashion innovation by elites and emulation by plebeians:

> the latest fashion . . . affects only the upper classes. Just as soon as the lower classes begin to copy their style, thereby crossing the line of demarcation the upper classes have drawn and destroying the uniformity of their coherence, the upper classes turn away from this style and adopt a new one, which in its turn differentiates them from the masses; and thus the game goes merrily on. (Simmel 1971: 299)

But Simmel was as interested in the way that fashion bound people together in groups as he was in its role in reinforcing class hierarchies. He saw fashion as dependent on "the need of union on the one hand and the need of isolation on the other," and argued that only modern, class-based societies produced this conflicting need, since traditional cultures were structured more by collective "union" than the desire for individual differentiation (Simmel 1971: 301). Simmel's "top-down" model of fashion diffusion has been turned on its head (and occasionally its side) by later research showing the complexity of fashion innovation and diffusion (Blumer 1969), but his idea that fashion both binds individuals within groups while allowing them a sense of individual taste has become a truism of fashion theory. In addition, Simmel's argument that the transitory nature of fashion acculturates modern subjects to the constant change required by modern (and postmodern) civilization continues to be influential (Simmel 1904: 303; Lipovetsky 1994; Wilson 1987).

Early sociology's emphasis on fashion and class differentiation has been replaced by interest in the way it conveys a wide range of social meanings, including age, gender, ethnicity, personality, occupation, religion, and politics. A number of approaches have addressed these issues, including symbolic interactionism, social group theory, and the dramaturgical analyses of Erving Goffman. The school of symbolic interactionism, which was founded by Herbert Blumer and drew on the social psychology of George Herbert Mead, posits that individual identity is the product of ongoing self evaluation in relation to external conditions and interaction with other people (Blumer 1969; Mead 1934). Blumer attributed the sociological neglect of fashion in the early twentieth century to a blanket acceptance of Simmel's theories, along with a distaste for fashion as both trivial and nonrational:

> fashion seem[ed] to represent a kind of anxious effort of elite groups to set themselves apart by introducing trivial and ephemeral demarcating insignia, with a corresponding strained effort by non-elite classes to make a spurious identification of themselves with upper classes by adopting these insignia. (Blumer 1969: 276)

Blumer's alternative to top-down fashion diffusion became one of the most influential, introducing the concept of "collective selection." He argued that "design has to correspond to the direction of incipient taste of the fashion consuming public," and that in the competitive process of attempting to articulate this taste, "fashion readily ignores persons with the highest prestige and, indeed, by-passes acknowledged 'leaders' time after time." Blumer does not define the mechanism at work in the "collective selection" of designers, buyers, and consumers, but characterizes it in terms of a consensus model rather than a simple taste hierarchy determined by economic prestige (Blumer 1969: 281). Economic status continues to be emphasized by some classical economists to generalize about consumer behavior in terms of "Veblen effects." This term describes consumer activity in terms of "bandwagon" or "snob" behavior. Both are a reaction to the behavior of other consumers, but in very limited terms:

> Either an individual's demand for goods or services is increased by the fact that others are seen to be consuming them (bandwagon), or decreased by the fact that others are consuming them (snob). (Campbell 1987: 50)

The inadequacy of this binary model is indicated by Blumer's work as well as sociological reference-group theory, which examines the complex varieties of imitation and emulation that characterize fashion consumption. Such analyses indicate that "any one person may make use of a variety of positive, negative, comparative and normative reference groups (or role models) when deciding what course of action to take" (Campbell 1987: 51).

Social Psychology and Aesthetics

The social psychology of fashion has tended to focus on questions of influence and change, reflecting a market-driven research agenda aimed at making fashion trends more predictable (Belk 1995). Along with consumer behavior research, this kind of analysis looks for patterns and ways to anticipate the dynamics of fashion or account for its history. One of the most widely-debated issues in the social psychology of fashion is the nature and meaning of gendered clothing, with an emphasis on women's fashion. The best-known of these is James Laver's theory of the "shifting erogenous zone." According to Laver, women's fashion change is driven by men's interest in the parts of the female body they cannot easily see. As soon as one such part is fashionably exposed, male desire shifts restlessly to another, more hidden part, necessitating a stylistic change in order to keep men interested in women:

> This erogenous zone is always shifting, and it is the business of fashion to pursue it, without ever actually catching it up. It is obvious that if you really catch it up you are immediately arrested for indecent exposure. If you almost catch it up you are celebrated as a leader of fashion. (Laver 1937: 254)

In the case of the Victorian woman, concealed legs and a prominent bust were replaced by more visible legs and deemphasized *décolletage*. But as Valerie Steele has pointed out, Laver's theory essentially disregards social and historical factors in fashion change. For example, Laver explains the rise of the backless dress in the 1930s as result of men's boredom with women's exposed legs, but Steele notes that the trend followed swimsuit designs that were cut to expose the back for sun-tanning, as well as stricter film censorship in Hollywood, where low-cut necklines were replaced by backless dresses (Steele 1989: 42).

Rene König modified Laver's notion of the elusive "erogenous zone" into a more Freudian theory of clothing-as-erotic-concealment whereby clothing hides "hidden parts" (the genitals) in order to sublimate and intensify curiosity about them (König 1973: 91). But clothing can exaggerate, as well as conceal, body parts that signify gender, accentuating sexual difference by featuring secondary

sexual characteristics (breasts, hips, shoulders, etc.). In this sense, clothing's concealment evokes not only an inquisitive eroticism focused, as König suggests, on hidden – but clearly gendered – genitals, but also on the eroticism of making gender itself ambiguous. Marjorie Garber has suggested that this dynamic of sexual exaggeration and concealment is part of the impact of cross-dressing, which functions not simply to appropriate or displace one gender onto another, but as "a sign of the provocative destabilization of gender that is the very signature of the erotic" (Garber 1992: 25).

While it is difficult to avoid seeing clothes as an expression of interiority, social psychologies of fashion are almost always theoretically unsustainable from a cultural constructionist viewpoint. They are often based on unifying concepts of human psychology; they downplay the variety of social reference-groups within which clothing takes on context-dependent meanings, and – perhaps most important – they overestimate clothing's ability to communicate via a coherent master-code of psychic meanings. Sociologist Fred Davis points out that if fashion is a communicative code, it is one with very "low semanticity." He argues that although fashion "must necessarily draw on the conventional and tactile symbols of a culture, [it] does so allusively, ambiguously, and inchoately, so that the meanings evoked by the combinations and permutations of the code's key terms (fabric, texture, color, pattern, volume, silhouette, and occasion) are forever shifting or "in process" (Davis 1992: 5). Thus, even within a particular social group the way that clothing is interpreted will depend on a nexus of other discourses and interactions.

Fashion and Visual Culture

The indeterminacy of fashion's social meanings is linked to the enigma of fashion change, not only from a social standpoint, but in relation to the visual arts and other forms of cultural production. How autonomous and influential are fashion designers? Is their work determined by artistic trends, personal inspiration, or internal industry dynamics? A wide range of factors are at play in the design process, including production technology, new fabric innovation (such as synthetic fibers), and labor practices (Fine & Leopold 1993: 87–147; Watkins 1995, Phizacklea 1990). Within that context, Valerie Steele sees fashion innovation as being "rather like the legal profession: once a precedent has been set, a host of later decisions can be based on that first case" (Steele 1989: 59). Other fashion theorists argue that design decisions are essentially arbitrary, and that most fashion trends are "the almost haphazard outcome of going as far as one can go in a direction which circumstances may have rendered inevitable" (Langley Moore 1949: 13, cited in Steele 1985: 35; Davis 1992: 200–6). This "internalist" position highlights the self-referential nature of fashion design, but it ignores the "trickle-up" effect that occurs when the fashion industry appropriates vernacular styles such as denim jeans, leather jackets, and countless other components of

"street style" (Fiske 1989, Polhemus 1994). Internalist arguments ignore the relationship between popular and designer fashion, and promote an aesthetically isolated reading of *la mode pour la mode*.

At their best, aesthetic analyses of fashion trace the complex interrelationship between fashion, industry, and history. For example, John Harvey begins his book *Men in Black* with the proposal that "fashions change, and so do meanings; and the color black, naturally emphatic, has been used at different times to mark off individuals or groups in quite different ways . . . the meaning of a color is to a great extent the history of the color" (Harvey 1995: 13). This approach sees fashion as part of visual culture, linked closely to other aesthetic discourses. In *Seeing Through Clothes* Ann Hollander argues that within a particular culture, fashion works to "contribute to the making of a self-conscious individual image, an image linked to all other imaginative and idealized visualisations of the human body" within that culture (Hollander 1975: xiv). Her work sees Western figurative art as a collective projection of the body, with fashion as the link between those ideals and individual bodies.

The primary danger of aesthetic analyses is that the world of art and design is arbitrarily separated from the industries and discourses that support it. As Paul Hirsch notes, "In modern, industrial societies, the production and distribution of both fine art and popular culture entail relationships among a complex network of organizations which both facilitate and regulate the innovation process" (Hirsch 1991: 314). In addition to the separation of aesthetics from the context of cultural production, Hollander tends to limit fashion's frame of reference to the world of high art (with the inclusion of film and photography). This puts fashion in a traditional art-historical limbo, an approach Hollander suports in her book *Sex and Suits*:

> I have therefore continued in the old custom of speaking as if fashion in dress were a force with its own will, something that the collective desire of Western people brought into existence so that it might have an independent life . . . Clothes show that visual form has its own capacity, independent of practical forces in the world, to satisfy people, perpetuate itself, and make its own truth apart from linguistic reference and topical allusion. (Hollander 1994: 12–13)

While art and fashion do not simply mirror their cultural or industrial contexts, those contexts require more attention than Hollander allows. Separating fashion from the social specificity of its production and reception simplifies its definition as an object of study, but at the cost of its cultural richness.

Fashion and Cultural Studies

Cultural studies of fashion have been, for the most part, less concerned with formulating broad theories of fashion than with observing its social uses in

relation to broader issues of social power. Two early influences on this work were the semiotics of Roland Barthes and the youth-subculture studies of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (Barthes 1972, Hall & Jefferson 1976, Hebdidge 1979). Malcolm Barnard also sees the work of Raymond Williams as a powerful factor in cultural studies of fashion, because Williams' view of cultural production saw "both the designing and wearing of fashions and clothing as versions of forms of creativity ... As such, fashion and clothing are productive of the world in which we live" (Barnard 1996: 44; Williams 1958 and 1961). This view broke away from the dismissal of fashion as either trivial or simply reflective of the status quo, and drew attention to the ways in which subcultural groups use clothing to articulate identities and values.

Cultural studies of fashion thus tend to focus on the vernacular use of clothing and body ornamentation to represent a constellation of values and social practices rather than looking for general rules of fashion change and meaning. This has been called a "populist" approach by Fred Davis, who makes a counterargument for the continuing validity of a "center-to-periphery fashion system model" of innovation and diffusion. He complains that "populist critics are given to detect a veritable babble of dress 'discourses' in the postmodern society ... [which are] engaged in symbolic identity construction exchanges of one kind and another" (Davis 1992: 202–3). He argues that, regardless of the proliferation of popular style cultures, the industry and its design dictates remain the primary engine of fashion adoption.

But a reception-oriented reading of fashion does not imply that large-scale production has no impact on popular clothing. It suggests that the significance attached to that clothing is contextual and has as much to do with its circulation in local style cultures as with its commercial production and marketing. It does not assume, in other words, that the widespread popularity of a particular style means that it carries a uniform set of meanings. Davis's argument that today's international fashion conglomerates represent the continued presence of a unidirectional design elite also overlooks the fact that many contemporary fashion conglomerates are profitable primarily due to licensed products like jeans and perfume rather than innovative design. As a retail industry economist notes, "the focus has shifted away from designing, [but] ... if you have enough money and are good at marketing, you can create a strong brand" (Agins 1995: A1). It can be argued that fashion conglomerates increasingly capitalize on and repackage the stylistic innovations of "peripheral" social groups.

Angela Partington has taken up this issue in relation to the popularity of Dior's postwar New Look among working-class British women. Referring to a 1951 snapshot of a woman in a modified New Look gown, Partington notes that in terms of a "trickle-down" model, this dress would be considered a "watered down" version of the Dior design. This model implies two things, according to Partington: that non-elite fashion consumers are "less innovatory or adventurous in their preferences," and that class difference is, to some extent, masked by working-class emulation of the fashions associated with higher social status. She

argues, however, that "the mass-market systems on which consumer culture depends provide specific conditions...under which class differences are re-articulated, rather than eroded or disguised," and that "the popular version of the New Look in the photograph is a deliberately different appropriation of it, not a poor copy" (Partington 1993: 145–6). Partington argues that,

> In a mass-market system, adoption of new styles is a process which depends on the flow of information within social strata rather than between them...there is no "emulation" of privileged groups by subordinate groups in such a system. Difference exists in the ways in which fashions are adopted, rather than in any time lag. (Partington 1993: 150–1)

As with the "Dior" dress she analyzes, even widely-diffused styles can be differently inflected within particular style cultures; in the post-war Britain she describes, the conflicting modes of femininity attached to the New Look (considered decorative and extravagant) versus the "Utility" dress (which signified restraint and practicality) were often "sampled and mixed together by the consumer to create fashions which depended on class-specific consumer skills for their meaning" (Partington 1993: 157).

This negotiation of fashion trends according to specific cultural values is also demonstrated in ethnographic research such as Maxine Craig's work on African-American men and women's complex relationship to hair straightening. For years many women saw "the process" of hair straightening as a requirement for respectability, while men's lye-straightened "conk" was associated with street style, hoodlums, and musicians. Rather than simply representing "identification with a white hair aesthetic," straight hair signified a variety of meanings related to class and gender. Craig concludes that African-Americans "created meanings that defined hair straightening in terms of status within their own communities rather than in terms of racial identification" (Craig 1997: 402–3). Similarly, Elizabeth Wilson has pointed out that such style cultures can easily turn against dominant culture, as in the case of "black hairstyles for both sexes which cannot successfully be imitated by whites." Like Partington, Wilson concludes that there is far more to fashion than the imitation of dominant culture, since style frequently serves to "reinforce class barriers and other forms of difference" (Wilson 1987: 9).

Conclusion

The proliferation of style cultures stimulated by consumerism has made the dynamics of fashion increasingly relevant to the study of social relations (Featherstone 1991). To the extent that fashion functions as a set of internalized social norms and disciplines, it also has the power to generate and express resistance to those norms. Cultural studies has been part of a significant shift in attitudes

toward such phenomena and a growing recognition that fashion, like other forms of material culture, can be a powerful medium of collective identity and cultural expression. Like consumerism, it may also be seen as "the very arena in which culture is fought over" (Douglas & Isherwood 1996: 37), and cultural studies of fashion must continue to articulate those struggles.

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