The Self as Image

A Critical Appraisal of Postmodern Theories of Fashion

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UNTIL RECENTLY, MOST feminist critiques of women's fashion have been underpinned by a functionalist paradigm in which fashion has been criticized for failing to obey the principle of practical utility. Thus for instance, the suffragist movement in the mid-19th century criticized female dress insofar as it hindered the physical mobility of women and was detrimental to their health. Theorists such as Veblen and Loos in the early 20th century also criticized the highly ornate and impractical dress of women as an unnecessary and wasteful indulgence, symptomatic of the economic dependence of women on men. Somewhat later, in the 1940s, theorists such as de Beauvoir developed these arguments further[1] and these formed the basis for the criticisms of female fashion in the 1970s and 1980s by feminist theorists such as Brownmiller, Baker and Oakley.

In opposition to such forms of apparel, these critics advocated more functional modes of dress which eschewed adornment designed to enhance the sexual allure of the wearer. They argued that women should adopt a more 'natural' form of dress which revealed the body for what it was rather than seeking to transform it by artificial means in conformity with some externally imposed ideal of beauty. Implicit in this mode of critique was a principle which was central to modernist design – namely, the idea of 'form follows function' in which the 'rationality' of manufactured artefacts was assessed in terms of their practicality. In this paradigm, good design was that which resulted in the production of objects which could fulfil their function in the most efficient way possible. The aesthetic form of the object

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was derivative of its practical function. Thus, anything considered superfluous to the functioning of the object was deemed 'unaesthetic'.

Increasingly however, this functionalist paradigm has come under criticism by postmodern designers[2] and theorists such as Wilson, Sawchuck and Hollander who have argued that the assumption that there is a 'natural' or 'functional' mode of dress which serves certain universal, biologically determined needs such as warmth and protection, is untenable, since what is considered 'natural' or 'functional' is itself culturally determined. As they point out, to assume that there is a mode of dress which reflects the body 'as it really is' wrongly presupposes that the body pre-exists culture when in fact it is always inescapably encoded by cultural norms. In place of an appeal for clothing which is 'functional' or 'natural', recent theorists of fashion such as Wilson and Silverman argue instead for forms of dress which highlight the constructed nature of the body and of self-identity. In these theories, dress becomes a parodic play in which the body of the wearer is denaturalized.

However, as I shall argue in this article, this conception of dress is also problematic insofar as it leaves unchallenged the reduction of self-identity to image which the advertising and fashion industries now endorse and promote. While postmodern theorists of fashion have revealed the untenability of the notion of the 'natural' body as a criterion by which to assess the rationality of particular modes of dress, their alternative definition of liberatory dress is equally limiting insofar as it fails to question the privileging of the cult of appearance over all other sources of identity formation which has become a hallmark of postmodern culture. Nowhere is this clearer than in the later writings of Baudrillard where fashion is uncritically embraced precisely insofar as it epitomizes the society of the spectacle and the cult of the artificial. While other postmodern theorists of fashion such as Wilson, Young and Silverman maintain a more critical perspective on fashion than does the later Baudrillard, nevertheless, they share in common an acceptance of the notion of the self as image.[3]

It is from this perspective that I shall examine the postmodern challenge to the functionalism of earlier critiques of fashion. In order to set the context for my analysis of postmodern theories of fashion, it is necessary first to outline the paradigm against which they have reacted.

Functionalist Critiques of Fashion

During the 19th century, when the first feminist critiques of fashion were developed, female dress was criticized for reinforcing the subservience of women to men because of its impractical and excessively ornate nature (Tickner, 1984). Amelia Bloomer, an American feminist in the 1850s, for instance, criticized the female dress of the day insofar as it hindered the physical mobility of women, reinforcing the confinement of women (at least those of the middle class) to a sedentary form of existence in the domestic sphere. Female dress, particularly the corset, was also criticized for being detrimental to the physical health of women. Bloomer proposed a new form

of dress for women which she saw as being more functional, comfortable and hygienic – namely pantaloons – to replace the many layers of heavy underpetticoats which were the fashion of the day.

Theorists in the late 19th and early 20th centuries such as Veblen and Loos, also criticized women's fashion from a similar perspective. In his book, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1970), Veblen criticized the highly decorative and impractical dress of women of his day whose primary function was to symbolize the wealth and status of their husbands. Whereas prior to the 19th century, the dress of both men and women of the upper classes had been extremely ornate, symbolizing the fact that they did not have to work for a living, in the 19th century, ornate dress became the sole preserve of middle-class women, their male counterparts adopting much more austere forms of dress. The reason for this lay in the fact that, whereas previously women had participated actively in the economic life of the household, once the place of work became physically separated from the place of domicile, they were no longer required to engage in any form of labour, including domestic labour, which was generally carried out by servants. The fact that middle-class women did not have to work for a living was seen as indicative of the wealth and status of their husbands and was made visible by the extravagant clothes which they wore. As Veblen (1970: 126) wrote:

> It has in the course of economic development become the office of the woman to consume vicariously for the head of the household; and her apparel is contrived with this object in view. It has come about that obviously productive labour is in a peculiar degree derogatory to respectable women, and therefore special pains should be taken in the construction of women's dress, to impress upon the beholder the fact . . . that the wearer does not and cannot habitually engage in useful work. Propriety requires respectable women to abstain more consistently from useful effort and to make more of a show of leisure than men of the same social classes. . . . [A woman's] sphere is within the household, which she should 'beautify' and of which she should be the 'chief ornament'. . . . By virtue of its descent from a patriarchal past, our social system makes it the woman's function in an especial degree to put in evidence her household's ability to pay . . .

Furthermore, the fact that women consented to wearing these clothes was symptomatic of their subservience to their husbands or fathers since they were far more uncomfortable and incapacitating than the dress for men. As Veblen (1970: 127) wrote:

> Wherever wasteful expenditure and the show of abstention from effort is . . . carried to the extent of showing obvious discomfort or voluntarily induced physical disability, there the immediate inference is that the individual in question does not perform this wasteful expenditure and undergo this disability for her own personal gain in pecuniary repute, but in behalf of someone else to whom she stands in a relation of economic dependence; a

> relation which in the last analysis must ... reduce itself to a relation of servitude.... The high heel, the skirt, the impracticable bonnet, the corset, and the general disregard of the wearer's comfort which is an obvious feature of all civilized women's apparel, are so many items of evidence to the effect that in the modern civilized scheme of life the woman is still, in theory, the economic dependent of the man – that, perhaps in a highly idealized sense, she still is the man's chattel.

The Austrian architect, Adolf Loos was another who criticized women's fashion for its ostentation and lack of practicality. His critique of women's fashion was influenced by the idea that 'form should follow function' which became the guiding principle of the modernist movement in design. According to this doctrine, a well-designed object was one whose aesthetic form was determined by its practical function. Utilitarian considerations were primary while those aspects which did not contribute to the more efficient functioning of the object were deemed unaesthetic, i.e. beauty became equated with or reduced to utility, the two being indistinguishable. In his view, the elaborate nature of women's dress was an unnecessary and wasteful indulgence, requiring a huge expenditure of labour to produce and affordable only by the wealthy. Furthermore, it was objectionable insofar as it was indicative of an unrestrained sensuality. In his essay 'Ornament and Crime' (1966), he argued that the progressive taming of those base instincts which threatened the stability of civilization manifested itself in the removal of ornament, i.e. in the removal of all that which was superfluous to the rational functioning of society. Male dress, in its emphasis on practicality and its avoidance of ostentatious ornamentation, was much more rational and democratic than that of females.[4] To quote Loos (1982: 102):

> The clothing of the woman is distinguished externally from that of the man by the preference for the ornamental and colourful effects and by the long skirt that covers the legs completely. These two factors demonstrate to us that woman has fallen behind sharply in her development in recent centuries. No period of culture has known as great differences as our own between the clothing of the free man and the free woman. In earlier eras, men also wore clothing that was colourful and richly adorned and whose hem reached the floor. Happily, the grandiose development in which our culture has taken part this century has overcome ornament. The lower the culture, the more apparent the ornament.

The reason for the lack of progress towards a more rational form of dress for women lay in the fact that they remained economically subservient to men and so still depended on their appearance to attract and then keep a husband. Whereas men gained a sense of their own identity through their activities in the public arena, women were defined primarily by their appearance. As he (1982: 103) wrote in his article 'Ladies' Fashion':

> That which is noble in a woman knows only one desire: that she hold on to her place by the side of the big, strong man. At present this desire can only be fulfilled if the woman wins the love of the man. . . . Thus the woman is forced to appeal to the man's sensuality through her clothing, to appeal unconsciously to his sickly sensuality for which only the culture of the times can be blamed. The vicissitudes of women's fashion are dictated only by changes in sensuality.

Many of the elements of these early critiques of female fashion continued to inform the writings of theorists later in the 20th century such as de Beauvoir who, in *The Second Sex* (1975: 543) argued that:

> The purpose of the fashions to which [woman] is enslaved is not to reveal her as an independent individual, but rather to offer her as prey to male desires; thus society is not seeking to further her projects but to thwart them. The skirt is less convenient than trousers, high heeled shoes impede walking; the least practical of gowns and dress shoes, the most fragile of hats and stockings are the most elegant; the costume may disguise the body, deform it or follow its curves; in any case it puts it on display. Costumes and styles are often devoted to cutting off the feminine body from any activity. . . . Paralysed by inconvenient clothing and by the rules of propriety – then woman's body seems to man to be his property, his thing. Make-up and jewellery also further this petrification of face and body. The function of ornamental attire is to metamorphise woman into idol.

She also pointed out that elegance was bondage for women in that being well dressed required a great deal of money, time and care, deflecting their energies away from more worthy pursuits. Unable to exercise their creativity in other ways, they resorted to converting themselves into works of art. Admired for how they looked rather than for what they were, women became mere objects for the male gaze.

In the 1970s and 1980s, feminists such as Oakley (1981: 82–5), Brownmiller (1984), Baker (1984) and Coward (1984: 29–36) reiterated the oppressive nature of feminine ideals of beauty which generated in women a permanent sense of dissatisfaction with their appearance, undermining their self-esteem. Concurring with the view of earlier critics, they argued that female dress, in contrast to male dress, was much more subject to the vagaries of fashion, each change signalling the eroticization of yet another part of the female body. Not only did these frequent changes in fashion construct the female body as a site of constantly shifting erogenous zones, but they also encouraged the female consumer to spend more and more on clothes in an effort to keep up to date. In this respect, women became yoked to the imperatives of the capitalist economy which used the mechanism of built-in obsolescence as a way of increasing expenditure on consumer goods.

Feminists such as Orbach (1978), Chernin (1983), Baker (1984) and Coward (1984: 21–5, 39–46, 74–82), also drew attention to the new

pressures brought to bear on women by the advent of body-shaping techniques such as plastic surgery, diet and exercise. While female dress became less restrictive, this did not indicate that it had become more liberated since there were now more effective ways of moulding the body in accordance with the ideals of feminine beauty. These new techniques for fashioning the female body operated in an insidious way. For, though women were now encouraged to participate in exercise and to eat wisely, ostensibly to improve their health and fitness, the real raison d'etre for these activities was to attain the body shape deemed desirable by a patriarchal society – a body shape which was becoming increasingly thinner. This new ideal, as Coward pointed out (1984: 39–46), was really that of the pre-pubescent female. What made such a figure attractive was that it symbolized a sexuality which was not yet aware of itself. The adolescent girl was someone who possessed erotic allure without however being in command of her sexual desires.

Decrying the oppressive nature of feminine norms of beauty then, feminists such as Brownmiller, Chernin and Orbach argued for a return to the 'natural' body, i.e. for an acceptance of the way one was rather than seeking to mould one's body artificially, in accordance with unrealistic aspirations.[5] More functional modes of dress which enhanced ease of movement and comfort and deliberately eschewed those forms of adornment designed to promote the erotic appeal of the wearer such as high heeled shoes and cosmetics were also advocated by members of the Women's Movement. In their place, feminists often adopted forms of dress considered 'mannish' such as dungarees and boots.[6] The idea of 'burning one's bra' became emblematic of the feminist attempt to dispense with the restricting yoke of female dress which deformed the body into 'unnatural' shapes in order to conform to the prevailing ideals of female beauty.

The Postmodernist Challenge to Functionalist Critiques of Fashion

In recent times however, a number of theorists such as Wilson (1987, 1990a, 1990b), Sawchuck (1987), Silverman (1986), Hollander (1993) and Gaines (1990) have challenged some of the basic assumptions underlying this functionalist critique of fashion. First, they have questioned the assumption that there is such a thing as a 'natural' body which pre-exists culture, arguing that the body is always-already encoded by culture. Indeed, the very concept of a 'natural' body is specific to Western society. As Mascia-Lees and Sharpe (1992: 3) write for example:

> Often it is assumed that the unadorned, unmodified body is an unspoiled, pure surface on which culture works. This dehistoricizes and decontextualizes the body. It ignores the particular meaning that both the body and the specific modifications to which it is subjected have for the people being represented. It resolves all bodies into the Western notion of the body as prior to culture and thus, as natural. Contemporary theorizing . . . has contributed recently to

> exposing 'the natural' as a Western cultural construct, calling into question the often taken for granted dichotomy between nature and culture. . . . Understanding the body not as simple materiality but rather as constituted within language is intended to question traditional notions of the body as prior to or outside of culture.

Hollander's argument in her book *Seeing through Clothes* is salutary in this regard. She points to the impossibility of regarding the body as unmediated by culture as indicated by the fact that the way the nude has been portrayed in art has been shaped by the prevailing notions of fashionable dress. Rather than depicting the naked body 'as it really is', artists have been unconsciously influenced by the ideals of beauty which were manifest in the dress of the time. As Hollander (1993: xii–xiii) writes:

> It is tempting to ... subscribe to the notion of a universal, unadorned mankind that is universally naturally behaved when naked. But art proves that nakedness is not universally experienced and perceived any more than clothes are. At any time, the unadorned self has more kinship with its own usual *dressed* aspect than it has with any undressed human selves in other times and places, who have learned a different visual sense of the clothed body. It can be shown that the rendering of the nude in art usually derives from the current form in which the clothed figure is conceived. This correlation in turn demonstrates that both the perception and the self-perception of nudity are dependent on a sense of clothing – and of clothing understood through the medium of a visual convention.

Once the social constitution of the body is acknowledged, then it is no longer tenable to uphold the naked body as being more 'genuine' or 'authentic' than the adorned body and to see fashion as the repression of the 'natural' body as earlier feminists tended to do since both the naked and the clothed body are equally products of culture. Both are 'artificial' in that they have been constituted by social conventions. A corollary of this is that the notion that certain modes of dress are more 'natural' than others and therefore to be preferred can no longer be sustained. This is made quite clear by Wilson (1987: 213) who argues that:

> ... the search for the 'natural' in dress must ... be a wild goose chase, for such a project tries to deny, or at least does not recognize that dress is no mere accommodation to the body as a biological entity, nor to geography or climate; nor does it merely link the two. It is a complex cultural form, as is the human conception of the body itself.

The same sort of criticism also applies to the notion of 'functional' dress upheld by the early critics of fashion, particularly Veblen and Loos. In arguing for a more 'rational' form of dress in which all that which was superfluous to its practical function was removed, both Loos and Veblen assumed, at least implicitly, that there were certain biologically determined

needs that pre-existed culture – such as the need for warmth and protection – and that the most rational form of dress was that which served these needs.

The problem with the concept of needs as biologically given was that this placed them beyond the reach of critical discussion. No longer was it possible to debate what constituted a basic need. The task simply became one of finding the most efficient means to achieve a pre-given end. What the modernist critics of fashion failed to realize is that 'function' itself is culturally defined and that what is considered a basic need in one culture may not be so in another. Thus, for example, while some cultures deem clothes to be an absolute necessity, other peoples living in the same climatic conditions have no need of clothes. The natives of Tierra del Fuego, for instance, did not wear clothes even though the climate was damp and chilly (Wilson, 1987: 55). One cannot assume, then, that there is some universal, objectively given set of physiological needs in terms of which the rationality of particular forms of clothing can be assessed. It is too simplistic to assume, as Veblen and Loos did, that there are certain universal criteria of comfort and practicability in dress, for what may be considered 'functional' dress in one epoch or culture may not be so in another.

Another aspect of functionalist critiques of fashion which has come under attack has been their puritanical asceticism in which anything which was deemed superfluous to the practicality of dress was discarded. It was on this basis, as we have seen, that Veblen and Loos railed against ornamentation in women's dress, preferring the more austere, restrained nature of male dress. However, as a number of critics have pointed out, in privileging the utilitarian over the merely aesthetic, what Veblen and Loos failed to realize was that they were in a certain sense being complicitous with the technocratic rationality of the capitalism of their day which valued only that which had a practical utility. As Adorno (1984: 83) argued in his critique of Veblen:

> ... he confronts society with its own principle of utility and proves to it that according to this principle, culture [and one could add, the aesthetic realm] is both a waste and a swindle.... Veblen has something of the bourgeois who takes the admonition to be thrifty with grim seriousness. Thus all of culture becomes for him the meaningless ostentatious display typical of the bankrupt.[7]

In their one-sided emphasis on practical utility, Veblen and Loos failed to acknowledge that as well as pragmatic needs, humans also have non-material needs such as the need for meaning, for understanding one's identity and relation to others, for beauty, etc. Such needs derive from the fact that unlike other animals, humans are self-conscious beings who have the capacity to posit goals and ideals not determined by natural instincts and impulses. To quote Adorno (1984: 86) once again:

> Luxury has a dual character. Veblen concentrates his spotlight on one side of it: that part of the social product which does not benefit human needs and contribute to human happiness but instead is squandered in order to preserve an obsolete system. The other side of luxury is the use of parts of the social product which serve not the reproduction of expended labour, directly or indirectly, but of man in so far as he is not entirely under the sway of the utility principle.

It is these ideas which have informed a number of recent theorists of fashion. As Wilson (1987: ch. 11) has argued, previous feminist critiques of fashion have denied the legitimacy of the aesthetic pleasures derived from dress. In her view, to understand all 'uncomfortable' dress as merely one aspect of the oppression of women is fatally to oversimplify, since dress is not and never has been primarily functional and is certainly not natural. As anthroplogists are only too well aware, the reasons why people wear clothing and other forms of bodily adornment often have little to do with the functions of warmth and protection. The importance of the non-functional needs served by clothing is indicated by the fact that even those feminists who sought to adopt a practical mode of dress never entirely eliminated purely decorative elements. For example, while they wore masculine boots, they were sometimes painted in rainbow colours; they also often adorned themselves with rings and long, bright earrings made of feathers, beads or metal and coloured their hair. Fashion, banished from clothing, reappeared surreptitiously in forms of adornment that were less obviously feminine or sexualized. Wilson also questions just how functional the feminist 'uniform' of dungarees was, arguing that it was more for symbolic reasons – i.e. the fact that they were traditionally regarded as male attire – rather than for their practicality that they were worn. In her view, the pointlessness of fashion, which is what Veblen abhorred, is precisely what makes it valuable. As she writes (1987: 245), 'it is in this marginalized area of the contingent, the decorative, the futile, that not simply a new aesthetic but a new cultural order may seed itself'.

Wilson also argues that the early feminist rejection of the purely decorative in dress betrays an unwitting alliance with puritanical, Christian denunciations of fashion. As she points out (1987: 209), many of the movements for dress reform in the 19th and early 20th centuries were inspired by Victorian and Christian ideas of propriety. These movements abhorred women's fashion insofar as it was seen to be too overtly erotic. In their view, the ornateness of women's fashion threatened to drag them into the stagnant waters of immorality. The similarity between the Christian critique of fashion and that of Loos is particularly striking in this regard. As we have seen, Loos quite explicitly decried ornament as symptomatic of an unbridled eroticism which threatened the rational order of civilization. Equating moral purity with simplicity, Christian dress reformers advocated a plainer form of dress which was regarded as being more 'natural' and hence 'truer' than the elaborate artifice of the women's fashion of the day. In

the process, they failed to realize that the 'natural' was just as artificial as the form of dress they were criticizing.

Likewise, Sawchuck has argued that critiques of fashion have often been tied to a Christian discourse which is intent on repressing women's potentially subversive sexuality and returning them to the confines of the domestic sphere. As she writes (1987: 68):

> ... the dress reform movements of the early twentieth century were often less concerned with making women more comfortable than with returning them to the proper sphere of the home; they were part of the movement for social purity. Just as improper dress indicated a woman's lack of reason and her immorality, a proper form of dress was said to enhance her 'natural' beauty, emphasising her health and freshness and promising her fecundity.

She concludes that the argument for austerity in dress and the return to more neutral forms valorizes what is seen as characteristic of men – namely, their rationality – and reinforces the stereotypical conception of women as superficial, duplicitous and in possession of a sexuality which, if not kept under control, poses a threat to men.

This view is shared by Schor who, in her book *Reading in Detail* (1987), contends that the denigration of the decorative by critics of fashion betrays a contempt for the feminine since, traditionally, the decorative has been associated with women. Repeatedly, as she points out, the ornamental has been associated with feminine duplicity and decadence. Ornament has often been dismissed as being trivial, superficial, lacking in substance, irrational – all features which have been attributed to the feminine. This is evident in neo-classical aesthetics for example which, as she argues (1987: 45), has been:

> ... imbued with the residues of ... a sexist imaginary where the ornamental is inevitably bound up with the feminine.... This imaginary femininity weighs heavily on the fate of the detail as well as of the ornament in aesthetics, burdening them with the negative connotations of the feminine: the decorative, the natural, the impure and the monstrous.

In her view then, the feminist critique of the decorative in dress continues to partake in the denigration of that which has traditionally been associated with the feminine.

Hanson adumbrates further on this theme in her article 'Dressing Down Dressing Up: The Philosophic Fear of Fashion' (1993). She argues that underlying the hostility to fashion is a fear of or discomfort with the body. Western thought, and philosophy in particular has privileged the mind over the body and has therefore been dismissive of anything associated with the body. While the realm of the mind represents all that is rational, the realm of the body is equated with the irrational and thereby devalued. Underlying this hatred of the body is a wish to evade the

acceptance of our mortality. As disembodied minds, we can avoid having to recognize the necessarily contingent nature of our existence. Since fashion is intimately connected with the body, philosophers have thus been largely hostile to it. As she points out, philosophers can only appreciate the aesthetic when it is dissociated from the body. As a realm of disinterested pleasure, the aesthetic is granted a superior status to the merely physical pleasures of the senses. Fashion however, calls attention to the physicality of the body and to its ephemeral nature. While it may seek to disguise the changing, always ageing human body, in its very transitoriness, it actually ends up by underscoring the fact of mortality. Fashions are born and die; they may sometimes be revived but the revivals are never quite the same as the originals. Thus, whereas philosophers can appreciate the beauty of a work of art, attention to dress is scorned since it is inseparable from attention to the body. She argues that insofar as feminists share with philosophers their hostility towards fashion, they are unwittingly perpetuating this denigration of the body. And this is particularly problematic for feminists since the body has traditionally been associated with the feminine while the mind has been equated with the masculine. So, in being dismissive of the body and all that is associated with it, feminists are acquiescing to a patriarchal ideology which devalues all that which falls outside the sphere of the mind. As she (1993: 235) writes:

> Philosophy's drive to get past what it takes to be the inessential has usually been linked with a denial or devaluation of what it has typically associated with the woman. Thus, even when traditional philosophy turns to aesthetics and for once, interest can focus unashamedly on appearances, an opportunity is still sought to disparage the body. A tradition that displays this sort of embarrassment about carnality may not be the most agreeable companion on the quest to reassert and revaluate women's lives and feminine experience.

Critical Appraisal of Postmodern Theories of Fashion

Having rejected the notion of 'natural' or 'functional' dress as a yardstick by which to assess the rationality of particular modes of dress, recent theorists of fashion such as Silverman, Wilson and Young have proposed that the most liberatory form of dress is that which highlights the fact that the body is a cultural construction. Silverman, for instance (1986: 148), argues, contrary to earlier feminist critiques of fashion, that the constant transmutations of female dress, far from being oppressive of women, are potentially more disruptive both of gender and of the symbolic order than is the relatively static nature of male dress which defines identity as fixed and stable rather than as fluid and mutable. In particular, she champions 'op shop' dressing, which involves the self-reflexive adoption of previous styles. What is salutary about this mode of dress for her is not simply that it acknowledges the 'fake' nature of all styles, but that it highlights the fact that there is no true self behind the various guises that one adopts. One's identity is equated with the guises which one adopts. It is not the case that the self exists

independently of the clothes that one wears. Rather, one is defined through one's mode of dress. As Silverman writes (1986: 149), 'clothing not only draws the body so that it can be seen, but also maps out the shape of the ego'.

Likewise, Wilson argues for a mode of dress as masquerade – not in the sense of putting an ironic distance between the costume/uniform/camouflage and the wearer who sports it as a mask or disguise but, rather, as the form in which the body actually manifests itself. As she writes (1990a: 233):

> So far as women are concerned – and fashion is still primarily associated with women – contemporary fashions arguably have liberatory potential. . . . For in 'denaturalising the wearer's specular identity' contemporary fashion refuses the dichotomy, nature/culture. Fashion in our epoch denaturalises the body and thus divests itself of all essentialism. This must be good news for women, since essentialist ideologies have been oppressive to them. Fashion often plays with, and playfully transgresses, gender boundaries, inverting stereotypes and making us aware of the masquerade of femininity.

In a similar vein, she writes (1990a: 216) that 'with punk, women transgress norms of feminine beauty; when a young woman shaves her head and draws red lines round her eyes, the very notion of make up and hairstyles as an enhancement of what 'nature' has provided is gone and the body is treated more radically than ever before as an aspect of performance'.

Young also praises fashion insofar as it offers women the invitation to play with identities. As she writes (1994: 208–9):

> One of the privileges of femininity in rationalized instrumental culture is an aesthetic freedom, the freedom to play with shape and color on the body, to don various styles and looks, and through them exhibit and imagine unreal possibilities. . . . Such female imagination has liberating possibilities because it subverts, unsettles the order of respectable, functional rationality in a world where that rationality supports domination.

The problem, however, is that a mode of dress which declares the constructed nature of identity is not sufficient to define it as liberatory. Indeed, in the present age where self-identity has increasingly been defined in terms of one's physical appearance by the advertising industry, one could argue that modes of dress which promote the view of the self as a series of changing guises are conservative insofar as they leave unchallenged the reduction of self-identity to an image which is constructed by the commodities one buys. As Kellner points out in his analysis of Madonna for instance, while her radical transmutations of appearance highlight the social constructedness of identity, fashion and sexuality, at the same time (1994: 178):

> . . . by constructing identity largely in terms of fashion and image, [she] plays into precisely the imperatives of the fashion and consumer industries that

> offer a 'new you' and a solution to all of your problems by the purchase of products and services. By emphasizing image, she plays into the dynamics of the contemporary image culture that reduces art, politics, and the theatrics of everyday life to the play of image, downplaying the role of communication, commitment, solidarity and concern for others in the constitution of one's identity and personality.

While Young promotes women's play with various guises as subversive of the instrumental rationality of capitalism, this form of rationality is no longer dominant. Now, it is precisely the hedonistic experimentation with different styles of appearance which is the main legitimizing ideology of our age as the consumption of commodities has come to assume an ever greater importance in the capitalist economy.[8] Whereas in the past, individuals were seen to have an identity apart from the goods they possessed, in the present era, one's identity is defined in terms of the image that one creates through one's consumption of goods, including the clothes one wears. As Featherstone points out (1991: 187–93), in our modern consumer culture, a new conception of the self has emerged – namely, the self as performer – which places great emphasis upon appearance, display and the management of impressions. This replaces the 19th-century concern with character in which primacy was given to such qualities as citizenship, democracy, duty, work, honour, reputation and morals. Likewise, Finkelstein writes in *The Fashioned Self*, (1991: 5): 'in the modern era ... we have fused together the capacity for conspicuous consumption with the presentation of personality'. She goes on to argue (1991: 190) that:

> ... the emphasis given to the presentation of the self in our daily social life, and the proliferation of goods, services and techniques aimed at allowing us to produce a distinctive identity, have the effect of deflecting attention away from a more valuable source of identity, namely, the historical precedents and the immediate politics of our circumstances.

While experimentation with various modes of dress can contribute to the subversion of traditional notions of gender identity for instance, there is the very real danger in our present era, where appearance has become the central means of defining one's identity, of losing sight of the fact that rebellion through fashion is not in itself sufficient to bring about social change. As Wilson herself acknowledges (1990b: 35–6):

> ... however we might want to get away from the puritanism of the left in order to celebrate fashion as a legitimate and highly aesthetic pleasure, there are still problems about defending it.... This call to hedonism can represent a flight from more threatening problems; and the recognition of pleasure and beauty as important forces in our lives – which emphatically they are ... can easily degenerate into ... an abdication of discrimination that is merely decadent.

In the postmodern era, rebellion has primarily taken the form of adopting a certain style – i.e. of projecting a certain image – through the clothes one wears, rather than engaging with the economic and political structures which produce social inequality as evidenced by the various youth subcultures which first made their appearance in the postwar period. As Clarke et al. write (1977: 47–8):

> [Subcultures] 'solve', but in an imaginary way, problems which at the concrete material level remain unresolved. Thus the 'Teddy Boy' expropriation of an upper class style of dress 'covers' the gap between largely manual, unskilled, near-lumpen real careers and life-chances, and the 'all-dressed-up-and-nowhere-to-go' experience of Saturday evening.

One must be careful, then, not to become so preoccupied with the ironic play with various guises that one loses sight of the fact that there is more to forging one's identity than changing appearances. While clothes are potent symbols, it is not sufficient to simply adopt a different appearance as a way of redefining oneself. To quote Finkelstein once again (1991: 190):

> ... when a heightened or developed consciousness is sought through the cultivation of the body, then an era dawns in which only a partial understanding of collective social life can exist. In such a society, the continuity between the body politic and the private body has not been understood thoroughly enough to engender a sense of interest in those communal actions which are necessary for the progressive liberalization of a society.

The task today, then, is not so much that of 'de-naturalizing' the body since the fashion industry already does this, but, rather, of challenging the reduction of self-identity to the image one constructs through the clothes one wears. Arguing in a similar vein, Foster contends (1985: 10) that it is now more important to struggle against the notion of woman as 'artifice' than that of 'woman as nature'. Instead of upholding the notion of artifice in dress as subversive and seeking to extend it to encompass not only female but male dress as Wilson proposes (1990a: 233), it is the very notion of self as image which needs to be interrogated. It is one thing to recognize that, in the postmodern era, self-identity has become equated with one's style of presentation and another to accept this uncritically.

The inadequacy of the notion of 'artifice' as a criterion for defining dress which is subversive is particularly clear in the later writings of Baudrillard where he abandons his earlier critical stance on fashion to embrace it wholeheartedly. Baudrillard (1981) characterizes present-day society as a post-industrial one in which the world of production has given way to the world of consumption and of the spectacle. Whereas the early phases of capitalism were governed by an instrumental rationality in which technical efficiency was the primary consideration, now the main concern is with the styling of the appearance of commodities to seduce the consumer.

Commodities are now consumed not because they ostensibly satisfy some practical need but because they serve as ways of differentiating individuals within the social hierarchy. In the context of capitalist society where one's social position is no longer fixed at birth, commodities do not so much reflect but rather create status distinctions. For Baudrillard, these 'objects of consumption' function as signs whose meaning is not derived with reference to anything external to them but rather from their relation to other signs. Whereas in the past, objects were defined either in terms of their use value, their exchange value or their symbolic value (i.e. as symbolic of the relation between people as in gift exchange) now their meaning resides solely in their relation to other signs. As Baudrillard writes (1981: 67):

> . . . an object is not an object of consumption unless it is released from its psychic determinations as *symbol*; from its functional determinations as *instrument*; from its commercial determinations as *product*; and is thus *liberated as a sign* to be recaptured by the formal logic of fashion.

The phenomenon of fashion for Baudrillard epitomizes the present age, which is characterized by the growing independence and importance of the sign, for it is a system of freely circulating signs which commute and permutate without limits, colonizing ever more areas of social life from clothing to politics, economics, morality, sexuality, etc. Signs, including the clothes we wear, no longer represent something which exists independently of them, but rather are taken as the only reality. We live in a world constituted solely of images which are no longer seen to refer to anything beyond themselves but are themselves constitutive of what is taken to be real. The modern individual is fashioned and is more interested in the authority of the sign than in the elements it represents. Once clothing becomes dominated by the logic of fashion, its meaning transmutes in a completely random manner according to Baudrillard. Thus, for instance (Baudrillard, 1981: 79):

> . . . neither the long skirt nor the mini-skirt has an absolute value in itself – only their differential relation acts as a criterion of meaning. The mini-skirt . . . has no [fashion] value except in opposition to the long skirt. This value is, of course, reversible: the voyage from the mini – to the maxi – skirt will have the same distinctive and selective fashion value as the reverse . . .

In his early writings, Baudrillard criticized the constant permutations in fashion as giving the appearance of the new while in fact everything remained the same. As he argued in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (1981: 51):

> Fashion embodies a compromise between the need to innovate and the other need to change nothing in the fundamental order. It is this that characterizes 'modern' societies. Thus it results in a game of change.

In his view, the accelerated renewal of objects often serves as a substitute for real cultural and social progress. To quote him once again (1981: 50):

> ... fashion ... masks a profound social inertia. It itself is a factor of social inertia, insofar as the demand for real social mobility frolics and loses itself in fashion, in the sudden and often cyclical changes of objects, clothes and ideas.

Furthermore, fashion masks social inequalities by claiming to be accessible to everyone. 'It is one of those institutions that best restores cultural inequality and social discrimination, establishing it under the pretense of abolishing it' (1981: 51). Likewise, in his other early writings on fashion in *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1993: 87–95), Baudrillard argues that fashion simulates the new, the latest, the most up to date, as it recycles past forms and models. Thus, 'fashion is paradoxically out of date, the non-contemporary'. Simulating 'joy in appearances' and 'the innocence of becoming', fashion represents the triumph of the artificial, 'the seizure of the living by the dead'. Fashion is thus 'the frivolity of the *déjà-vu*' in its incessant replacement of one series of recycled forms by another.

However, in his later writings, particularly his work *Seduction* (1990b), he upholds the society of the spectacle as superior to the earlier phases of capitalism which were dominated by the logic of production. In his view, the society of the spectacle represents a liberation from the tyranny of technocratic reason which subjected the free play of the senses to the iron rule of practical necessity. Consequently, he now celebrates the phenomenon of fashion which, for him, epitomizes the society of the spectacle where the cult of appearances is all important.[9] Fashion revels in the creation of images, making no pretence about their fabricated nature. In his work *Seduction*, fashion and cosmetics become part of 'that radical metaphysics of appearance' which is part of the game of seduction. He valorizes appearances per se against depth models and presents positively Baudelaire's celebration of fashion and make-up. Fashion becomes part of a celebration of artifice, appearance and sign games. While philosophers have traditionally condemned seduction insofar as it operates within the realm of artifice and appearance, for Baudrillard it is precisely this fact which constitutes its strength. His valorization of seduction lies in the fact that it openly acknowledges that there is nothing beyond the realm of appearances and thus, rather than searching in vain for some 'truth' which transcends the world of artifice, it concerns itself with mastering the symbolic universe. He argues further that, generally, women have been more adept than men at the game of appearances and that rather than criticizing as artificial women who wear make-up etc. as feminists have done, that they should recognize that women's real strength lies in their mastery of the realm of the symbolic. As Baudrillard (1990a: 133) writes:

> For woman is but appearance. And it is the feminine as appearance that defeats the masculine as depth. Instead of protesting against this 'offensive' formula, women would do well to let themselves be seduced by the fact that here lies the secret of their strength which they are beginning to lose by setting up feminine depth against masculine depth.

What Baudrillard fails to realize however, is that in celebrating the notion of woman as artifice, he loses sight of the fact that such a view acquiesces to the advertising industry which promotes the judgement of people, particularly women, by their appearances rather than by their deeds. In doing so, he overlooks the way in which the emphasis on appearance has been oppressive for women insofar as it has come to substitute for other forms of self-realization. Since women's self-esteem and success have been seen to depend more on their looks than on their achievements, many women have tended to become obsessed with the fashioning of their appearance to the detriment of the development of other aspects of their self-identity.[10]

In conclusion, then, Baudrillard's uncritical embracing of the notion of self as appearance in his later writings highlights the limitations of postmodern theories of fashion which seek to define liberatory dress in terms of that which de-naturalizes the body. While postmodern theorists such as Wilson, Young and Silverman do not completely forsake a critical perspective on fashion in the way that the later Baudrillard does,[11] nevertheless, their upholding of the notion of the self as defined by the various guises which it assumes, can be seen to be complicit with our contemporary culture of the spectacle which privileges the cult of appearance over all other sources of identity formation. In their desire to rehabilitate the legitimacy of the aesthetic pleasures of dress and to expose the one-sidedness of the utilitarian rationality of modernism, postmodern theorists of fashion have tended to lose sight of the equally limiting reduction of self-identity to appearance – a reduction which has been particularly damaging to women.

Notes

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1. Bell also developed his critique of dress at this time. Like Veblen, he was critical of the way in which the sumptuous nature of women's dress had been used to symbolize the wealth and status of their husbands though, in contrast with Veblen, he did not wish to set up functional dress as a universal ideal (1978: 184).

2. Radice (1984) provides a useful outline of the critique of the modernist doctrine of 'form follows function' by postmodern designers.

3. Wilson criticizes the early Baudrillard for his negative view of fashion(1990a: 220–1), but in his later work he actually takes an even more positive view of fashion than Wilson, as I shall argue later in this article.

4. As Finkelstein (1991: ch. 4) points out, such an assumption is highly questionable. While male dress may have been less ornate than female dress, it was still very much subject to the vagaries of fashion as witnessed, for example, in the many changes undergone by the necktie.

5. Shilling (1994: 63–7) provides a useful discussion of Orbach and Chernin in this regard.

6. See Oakley (1981: 83) for a description of feminist garb in the 1970s.

7. See Adorno (1979: 31–41) for a further elaboration of his critique of functionalism as expounded by theorists such as Loos. Wellmer (1983) also provides a critique of the vulgar functionalism of modernism drawing on the arguments of Adorno.

8. See Giroux (1993–4) for a development of this argument. See also Bordo (1993), who points out the similarity between postmodern notions of the body and self identity and those promoted by the fashion and advertising industry.

9. Kellner (1989: section 4.1) presents a useful discussion of Baudrillard's views on fashion. See also Barnard (1996: 150–5) and Tseelon (1995: 128–35).

10. See Freedman (1988) for a further elaboration of this point.

11. See Young (1994: 201–3, 209) and Silverman (1986: 148), for instance, where they indicate their reservations about fashion.

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