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Do Clothes Speak? What Makes them Fashion?

It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances. The true mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible.

Oscar Wilde

That the clothes we wear make a statement is itself a statement that in this age of heightened self-consciousness has virtually become a cliché. But what is the nature of the statements we make with our clothes, cosmetics, perfumes, and coiffures, not to mention the other material artifacts with which we surround ourselves? Are such statements analogous to those we make when we speak or write, when we talk to our fellows? In short, as the novelist Alison Lurie (1981) has recently claimed, though hardly demonstrated, is clothing not virtually a visual *language*, with its own distinctive grammar, syntax, and vocabulary? Or are such statements more like music, where the emotions, allusions, and moods that are aroused resist, as they almost must, the attribution of unambiguous meanings such as we are able to give the objects and actions of everyday life: this chair, that office, my payment, your departure? If the latter is the case, it is perhaps incorrect to speak of them as statements at all. Or can it be that clothes sometimes do one and sometimes the other, or possibly both at the same time—that is, make clear reference to who we are and wish to be taken as while alternatively or simultaneously evoking an aura that “merely suggests” more than it can (or intends to) state precisely?¹

1. No finer rendering of dress's capacity to suggest a good deal more than it states exists than Robert Herrick's (1579–1674) poem “Delight in Disorder”:

A sweet disorder in the dress	Ribbands to flow confusedly:
Kindles in clothes a wantonness:	A winning wave, deserving note,
A lawn about the shoulders thrown	In the tempestuous petticoat:
Into a fine distraction:	A careless shoe-string, in whose tie
An erring lace, which here and there	I see a wild civility:
Enthral the crimson stomacher:	Do more bewitch me, than when art
A cuff neglectful, and thereby	Is too precise in every part.

(Taken from *The Oxford Book of English Verse*, edited by Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch. New York: Oxford University Press, 1941.)

Cultural scientists must address these questions (as they have not thus far) if they are ever to make sense of a phenomenon that has periodically intrigued them, less for its own sake, unfortunately, than for the light they thought it could shed on certain fundamental features of modern society, namely, social movements, social stratification, and mass-produced tastes. I speak, of course, of fashion and some of its many facets: its sources in culture and social structure, the processes by which it diffuses within and among societies, the purposes it serves in social differentiation and social integration, the psychological needs it is said to satisfy, and, not least of all, its implications for modern economic life. But oddly, one facet sociologists have not fastened on—nor for that matter have psychologists or anthropologists to any appreciable extent—is that which joins the makers, purveyors, and consumers of fashion, namely, its meaning. By meaning, I refer to the images, thoughts, sentiments, and sensibilities communicated by a new or old fashion and the symbolic means by which this is done (Davis 1982). Such analytic neglect strikes me as analogous to watching a play whose dialogue is kept from us but whose gross gestural outlines, scenery, and props we are permitted to observe. Although we are likely to come away with some sense of what is going on—whether it is comedy, tragedy, or melodrama; whether it concerns love, murder, or betrayal—we would have only the vaguest idea of the whys and wherefores. In the case of the sociological interest in clothing and fashion, we know that through clothing people communicate some things about their persons, and at the collective level this results typically in locating them symbolically in some structured universe of status claims and life-style attachments. Some of us may even make so bold as to assert what these claims and attachments are—“a tramp presuming the hauteur of a patrician,” “nouveau riche ostentation masking status anxiety”—but, as in the voiceless play, the actual symbolic content that elicits such interpretations eludes us. Lacking such knowledge, we can at best only form conclusions without quite knowing how we derived them; this is something we often have to do in everyday life, but by itself it hardly satisfies the requirements of a science.

THE CLOTHING CODE

In the past decade or so certain newer intellectual currents in the social sciences and humanities have begun to offer hope for penetrating this gap in the sociological analysis of fashion, if not for altogether filling it. I refer to the burgeoning—some would say, not altogether unjustifiably, omnivorous—field of semiotics, in particular to its seminal notion of *code* as the binding ligament in the shared understandings that comprise a sphere of discourse and, hence, its associated social arrangements. Following Eco ((1979), then, I would hold that clothing styles and the fashions that influence them over time constitute something approximating a *code*. It is a code, however, radically dissimilar from those used in cryptography; neither can it be more generally equated with the language rules that govern speech and writing. Compared to these clothing's code is, as the linguist would have it, of “low semanticity.” Perhaps it can best be viewed as an incipient or quasi-code, which, although it must necessarily draw on the conventional visual and tactile symbols of a culture, 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.”² The anthropologist and linguist Edward Sapir (1931, 141) with characteristic insight noted this about fashion more than fifty years ago:

The chief difficulty of understanding fashion in its apparent vagaries is the lack of exact knowledge of the unconscious symbolisms attaching to forms, colors, textures, postures, and other expressive elements of a given culture. The difficulty is appreciably increased by the fact that some of the expressive elements tend to have quite different symbolic references in different areas. Gothic type, for instance, is a nationalistic token in Germany while in Anglo-Saxon culture, the practically identical type known as Old English . . . [signifies] a wistful look backward at madrigals and pewter.

2. Levine (1985) argues that Western social thought and social science have over the centuries developed an almost institutionalized aversion toward dealing in analytically constructive ways with ambiguity. This may help account for the proclivity of many social scientists, in particular modern structuralists like Lévi-Strauss and Barthes, to so readily assimilate clothing communication into the axiomatic structure of Saussure's linguistic model.

Clearly, while the elements Sapir speaks of do somehow evoke “meanings”—moreover, meanings that are sufficiently shared within one or another clothes-wearing community—it is, as with music, far from clear *how* this happens.³ Associative linkages to formal design elements (e.g.: angularity = masculine; curvilinear = feminine) are obviously involved (Sahlins 1976, 189–92), as are linkages to occasions (e.g.: dark hue = formal, serious, business; light hue = informal, casual, leisure) and to historical frames of reference (e.g.: bindings, stays, and corseting = Victorian, pre-female emancipation; loose fit, reduced garment volume, exposed skin = the post-World War I modern era). There are, though, as McCracken (1985a) has so tellingly demonstrated in his research, no fixed, rule-governed formulas, such as exist for speech and writing, for employing and juxtaposing these elements. The correspondence with language is at best metaphoric and, according to McCracken, misleadingly metaphoric at that. Schier (1983) states the matter nicely in his criticism of Roland Barthes’s *The Fashion System*: “There is certainly something to the idea that we say things with what we choose to wear, though we must not press too hard to find a set of rules encoded in every choice.”⁴ Chast’s cartoon drawing lights on the same point even more tellingly.

Temporally, too, there is reason to be cautious about ascribing precise meanings to most clothing. The very same apparel ensemble that “said” one thing last year will “say” something quite different today and yet another thing next year. Ambiguity, there-

3. Some indication of how such meanings are accomplished, albeit within a rather narrow sphere of apparel accessory design, is given by Brubach (1989c, 67) in her report on fashions in sunglasses: “Mikli [a sunglasses designer] has just finished designing a collection for Ray-Ban’s international division—five sunglasses frames intended as a feminine alternative to the Macho classics. The shapes are up-swept and less severe, suggestive of the way the eyes turn up at the corners when a person smiles; the lines are curved rather than straight; and the contours are sculptural, not flat like those of the Wayfarer [an earlier, highly successful, “masculinized” Ray-Ban style]. Mikli says it’s possible to change *le regard* altogether, to give a face an entirely different expression—an expression of violence, of sensuality, of sweetness, or whatever one chooses. So that, even though the eyes are hidden, by the act of reproducing the shape of the eye in some exaggerated form sunglasses can reconstitute *le regard* and remodel the face.”

4. Like Barthes, Descamps (1979) creates elaborate taxonomic schemes to decode, with spurious precision I would hold, exactly what clothing and fashions “mean.”

The Decoded Fashion Statements of Rhonda Perlmutter III



Drawing by R. Chast; © 1988 The New Yorker Magazine, Inc.

fore, is rife in what could be considered the contemporary dress code of Western society and is, as we shall see, becoming even more so.

To this condition of awesome, if not overwhelming, ambiguity, I would add three other distinguishing features of the clothing-fashion code, although many more could in fact be cited.⁵

5. For example, whereas speech messages unfold continuously as the speaker moves from one utterance to another, a clothing ensemble is capable of but a single

Enninger (1985), for example, lists as many as thirty-one. First, it is heavily context-dependent; second, there is considerable variability in how its constituent symbols are understood and appreciated by different social strata and taste groupings; and third, it is—at least in Western society—much more given to “undercoding” than to precision and explicitness.

Context-Dependency

Even more so, perhaps, than the utterances produced in everyday face-to-face interaction, the clothing-fashion code is highly context-dependent. That is, what some combination of clothes or a certain style emphasis “means” will vary tremendously depending upon the identity of the wearer, the occasion, the place, the company, and even something as vague and transient as the wearer’s and the viewers’ moods. Despite being made of identical material, the black gauze of the funeral veil means something very different from that sewn into the bodice of a nightgown. Similarly, the leisure suit that “fits in so nicely” at the outdoor barbecue will connote something quite different when worn to work, especially if you happen not to live in southern California.

High Social Variability in the Signifier-Signified Relationship

While the signifiers constituting a style, an appearance, or a certain fashion trend can in a material sense be thought of as the same for everyone (the width of a lapel, after all, measures the same in Savile Row as in Sears) what is *signified* (connoted, understood, evoked, alluded to, or expressed) is, initially at least, strikingly different for different publics, audiences, and social groupings: for the conservative as against the experimentally inclined, for the

message, however complex, until such time as the wearer decides to change clothes. Viewed differently, speech, unless captured in writing, fades quickly, whereas clothing holds its meaning over the duration of an encounter. Moreover, as the late Herbert Blumer (1984) reminded me in response to an early version of this chapter I had sent him, “while clothing may ‘speak,’ it seems rarely to engage in dialogue. The give and take in the adjustment of meaning (which is the mark of dialogue) does not seem to take place in the presentations of clothing; while clothing may say something, it is scarcely involved in conversation.”

fashion-wise as against the fashion-indifferent, for the creators of fashion and their coteries as against its consumers, including even relatively sophisticated consumers. In short, while certainly not rigidly castelike in its configuration, the universe of meanings attaching to clothes, cosmetics, hairstyles, and jewelry—right down to the very shape and bearing of the body itself (Fraser 1981, 215–19; Hollander 1980)—is highly differentiated in terms of taste, social identity, and persons’ access to the symbolic wares of a society.

Indeed, as the first social scientists who wrote on the subject were quick to declare (Sapir 1931; Simmel 1904; Tarde 1903; Veblen 1899), it is precisely the differentiated, socially stratified character of modern society that fuels the motor of fashion and serves as the backdrop against which its movements are enacted. In my opinion these writers, Veblen and Simmel in particular, placed *too* exclusive an emphasis on social class differentiation as the basis for fashion motivation. Still, they must be credited for their lively recognition that clothing styles and fashions do not mean the same things to all members of a society at the same time and that, because of this, what is worn lends itself easily to a symbolic upholding of class and status boundaries in society.

That the same cultural goods connote different things for different groups and publics applies equally, of course, to almost any expressive product of modern culture, be it the latest avant-garde painting, a high-tech furniture piece, an electronic music composition, ad infinitum. In the symbolic realm of dress and appearance, however, “meanings” in a certain sense tend to be simultaneously both more ambiguous and more differentiated than in other expressive realms. (This holds especially during the first phases of a new fashion cycle, as I shall illustrate in a moment.) Meanings are more ambiguous in that it is hard to get people in general to interpret the same clothing symbols in the same way; in semiotic terminology, the clothing sign’s signifier-signified relationship is quite unstable. Yet the meanings are more differentiated inasmuch as, to the extent that identifiable thoughts, images, and associations crystallize around clothing symbols, these will vary markedly, most certainly at first, between different social strata and taste subcultures (Gans 1974).

Take, for example, the rather masculine, almost military styles

that were fashionable among some women in the mid-1980s: exaggerated shoulder widths tapering conelike to hems slightly above the knee. It is, I believe, difficult even now to infer quite what this look meant to the broad mass of fashion consumers. Several different interpretations were possible initially, and it was only after the fashion was well launched that some partial synthesis seemed to emerge from among competing interpretations as symbolically dominant, i.e., an appropriation of masculine authority, which at the same time, by the very exaggeration of its styling, pointedly undercut any serious claim to masculinity as such.

But whatever consensus may have been arrived at eventually, the broad shoulder—inverted cone look was bound to be perceived and responded to quite differently by the coteries, audiences, and publics to which it was exposed. For cosmopolitan fashion elites it appears to have signified a kind of gender-inverted parody of military bearing. Suburban, fashion-conscious socialites, on the other hand, were repelled at first by the severity of the silhouette, which was seen as a visual affront to the conventions of femininity. Many professional and career women, however, took favorably to the style because it seemed to distance them from unwelcome stereotypical inferences of feminine powerlessness and subservience. Judging by lagging retail sales, though, many mainstream middle-class homemakers regarded this same “look” as irrelevant at best, ugly and bizarre at worst. What meaning the style held for women factory and clerical workers is hard to infer. Assuming they became aware of it at all, it may have been devoid of meaning for them altogether, although nonmeaning in something that for others is pregnant with meaning is itself a kind of meaning in absentia.

Undercoding

That clothing styles can elicit such different responses from different social groups points to yet another distinguishing feature of the clothing code and the currents of fashion to which it is subject. That is, except for uniforms, which as a rule clearly establish the occupational identity of their wearers (see Joseph 1986), in clothing, as in the arts generally, undercoding (the phonetic proximity to *underclothing* here is perhaps not altogether infelicitous) is especially important in how meanings are communicated. Ac-

ording to Eco (1979, 135–36), undercoding occurs when in the absence of reliable interpretative rules persons presume or infer, often unwittingly, on the basis of such hard-to-specify cues as gesture, inflection, pace, facial expression, context, and setting, certain molar meanings in a text, score, performance, or other communication. The erotic message we carry away from the poet Herrick’s “erring lace,” “careless shoe-string,” and “cuff neglectful” is perhaps as good an example of undercoding in dress as can be found.⁶

At the same time it would be a mistake to assume that the undercoding of clothing and fashion is necessarily inadvertent or the product of an inherent incapacity of the unit elements constituting the code (fabric, color, cut, texture) to signify as clearly as do words or icons. (Again, the wearing of uniforms attests to clothing’s ability to register clear meanings for persons wishing to establish an unambiguous role identification for themselves.) Rather, the point is that in the main the clothing-fashion code much more nearly approximates an aesthetic code than it does the conventional sign codes, such as information-oriented speech and writing, semaphore, figures and charts, or road and traffic signs, employed in ordinary communication. As Culler (1976, 100) has so trenchantly observed:

The reason for the evasive complexity of these [aesthetic] codes is quite simple. [Conventional sign] codes are designed to communicate directly and unambiguously messages and notions which are already known. . . . But aesthetic expression aims to communicate notions, subtleties, [and] complexities which have not yet been formulated, and therefore, as soon as an aesthetic code comes to be generally perceived as a code (as a way of expressing notions which have already been articulated), then works of art tend to move beyond it. They question, parody, and generally undermine it, while exploring its mutations and extensions. One might even say that much of the interest

6. Another charming example of undercoding in the realm of clothing and its capacity to imply a great deal on the basis of minimal cues is offered by Gisele d’Assailly in her book *Ages of Elegance* (Paris: Hachette, 1968). There she reports that Marie Antoinette and her entourage would often refer to items of dress in such metaphors as “a dress of *stifled sighs* covered with *superfluous regrets*; in the middle was a spot of *perfect candour come-and-see* buckles; . . . a bonnet decorated with *fickle feathers* and streamers of *woebegone eyes*” (italics in original, 139; quoted in Rosencranz 1972, 287.)

of works of art lies in the ways in which they explore and modify the codes which they seem to be using.

What Culler does not say, and what is of special interest to the sociologist, is that such code modifications do not occur spontaneously, as if wholly and mysteriously dependent on some magical ferment called "aesthetic expression." Beyond the purely technical opportunities and limitations affecting an art or craft's ability to initiate some rather than other code modifications (Becker 1982), there also are the manufacturers, publicists, critics, merchandisers, and innovators (some of whom truly are artists) in whose interests it is to launch, inhibit, or otherwise regulate the transmission of code modifications from creators to consumers. Not that, as some Marxists would have it, all that happens in this connection can be attributed reductionistically to some conspiratorial, self-serving, profit-driven alignment of structurally interdependent economic interests. Still, to overlook the impress of such interests on what goes on from the moment of creation to that of consumption would be tantamount to attributing a persistent efficacy to free-floating ghosts.⁷

That undercoding is powerfully implicated in aesthetic expression would seem irrefutable. And to the extent that the fashion aspect of clothing can be viewed as aesthetic expression, which by and large it must, it is incumbent on us to try to understand better how fashion as such does and does not relate to what I have more generally termed the "clothing code."

FASHION AND THE CLOTHING CODE

Thus far I have claimed that, vague and elusive as its referents ("signifieds" in semiotic talk) may be when compared to ordinary speech and writing, what we wear, including cosmetics, jewelry, and coiffure, can be subsumed under the general notion of a code. This means that within that broad arc termed "contemporary

7. Consider in this connection the many flops recorded in fashion history, that is, failed attempts by designers, manufacturers, publicists, etc., to foist a new style on the public. The most recent of some notoriety was perhaps that of the publisher of *Women's Wear Daily*, John Fairchild, to marshal the considerable authority of his publication in behalf of the decisively rejected "midi look" of the early 1970s.

Western culture," a great deal of sign conventionalization obtains in clothing as it does in the arts and crafts generally. Hence, different combinations of apparel with their attendant qualities are capable of registering sufficiently consistent meanings for wearers and their viewers. (In today's world, a tennis outfit will never be mistaken for formal dress or a Nehru jacket for laborer's attire, much as the occasional eccentric may insist she or he means it to be taken that way.)

In referring to qualities, I have in mind such clothing features as fabric, color, texture, cut, weight, weave, stitching, transparency, and whatever else makes a difference in how the garment or its surrounding ensemble of apparel is responded to in a community of clothes-wearers. What qualities do and do not make a difference in how clothing is responded to in a "clothes community" can, up to a point, be conceptualized in terms analogous to the phonetic/phonemic distinction in linguistics. The essential distinction, however—what most distinguishes clothing as a mode of communication from speech—is that *meaningful* differences among clothing signifiers are not nearly as sharply drawn and standardized as are the spoken sounds employed in a speech community (see Hawkes 1977, 23–28).

To formulate matters as I have here is essentially to say no more or less than that clothing's meanings are cultural, in the same sense that everything about which common understandings can be presumed to exist (the food we eat, the music we listen to, our furniture, health beliefs, in sum, the totality of our symbolic universe) is cultural. Or as George Herbert Mead (1934) might have phrased it, the clothing we don calls out essentially, if not precisely (the difference is significant, though I shall not dwell on it here), the same images and associations in ourselves as it does in others, even granted that from time to time and from group to group different values will attach to them. For example, the shoulder-length hair of the male hippie, which for him and his friends connoted unisex liberation, for his more conventional contemporaries signified perverse androgyny and ostentatious slovenliness. But even such varying interpretations of the same grooming item or overall look are meaningful, provided each party understands where, in the vernacular, "the other is coming from," as most often each does. If, then, there exists among a society's members a sufficiently

shared perception of "how to read" different items, combinations, and styles of clothing, where does fashion come into the picture? Is *fashion* merely another way of designating some distinctive style or, more generally yet, as Robert and Jeanette Lauer (1981, 23) define it, "simply the modal style of a particular group at a particular time . . . the style which is considered appropriate or desirable?" The problem with these definitions and a host of others like them is their failure to differentiate adequately fashion per se from the consensually established clothing code (conventionalized signifiers, accepted canons of taste, etc.) operative in a society at a particular time. That some sort of difference exists between the operative code and those elements we term "fashion" is, to be sure, hinted at in even these definitions when they speak of a modal or prevalent style, implying thereby some succession of styles over time. But the implication for fashion is lost through the failure to discriminate between what happens during the last phases of a fashion cycle, when a style has already become part of the common visual parlance, and what happens at the beginning of the cycle, when the new style typically jars, or at least bemuses, us. Precisely this difference, of course, underlies the familiar insight that a fashion that has been accorded wide acceptance is, ironically, no longer fashionable.

Clearly, any definition of *fashion* seeking to grasp what distinguishes it from style, custom, conventional or acceptable dress, or prevalent modes must place its emphasis on the element of *change* we often associate with the term. (The word itself, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, derives from the Old French and originally meant, as it still does today in one of its usages, "to make" in the sense of "fabricate.") And at the level of communication, by *change* we necessarily imply, as the linguist Saussure insisted (MacCannell and MacCannell 1982, 10), some shift in the relationship of signifier and signified, albeit always bearing in mind that in dress the relationship between *signifiers* and the referents, attributes, or values thereby *signified* is generally much less uniform or exact than in written or spoken language. In any case, *fashion*, if it is to be distinguished from *style* and numerous other of its neighbor terms, must be made to refer to some alteration in the code of visual conventions by which we read meanings of whatever sort and variety into the clothes we and our contemporaries wear.

The change may involve the introduction of wholly new visual, tactile, or olfactory signifiers, the retrieval of certain old ones that have receded from but still linger in memory (Davis 1979), or a different accenting of familiar signifiers; but change there must be to warrant the appellation *fashion*.

This, I concede, skirts the issue of exactly how extensive such changes must be for us to speak of fashion rather than, for example, a modal style or the accepted dress code. Do the apparently slight modifications from season to season in hem length, waist or hip accenting, shoulder buildup, or lapel width represent code modifications of sufficient magnitude to justify the designation *fashion*? Our intuition says no, but it would be unwise to be too arbitrary with respect to the question. In the lived world of everyday dress, clothing design, and merchandising there is, perhaps inevitably, a good deal of uncertainty in the matter depending in no small part on whose interests are served by proclaiming the code modification a new fashion and whose by resisting such a proclamation. Among those coteries and publics for whom it is terribly important to be thought of as fashion trendsetters, the tendency will, of course, be to invest even minor changes with fashion significance. Among those more indifferent to fashion and those who cultivate a fashionably out-of-fashion stance (Kinsley 1983), the tendency will be to deny or discount those code modifications that manage to steal into one's wardrobe. Ideally, from a phenomenological as well as sociological point of view, one would want to restrict the word *fashion* to those code modifications that, irrespective of their apparent character, somehow manage on first viewing to startle, captivate, offend, or otherwise engage the sensibilities of some culturally preponderant public, in America the so-called middle mass. It is their acceptance or rejection of a code modification that will determine whether it succeeds as fashion or merely passes from the scene as a futile symbolic gesture.

FASHION AND SOCIAL IDENTITIES

What propels the clothing code modifications I take to be fashion? Whence does the impulse spring? What in Western civilization has kept it alive for better than six hundred years? Is it, as many main-

tain, merely a device for relieving boredom? Or is it, as others would have it, a self-perpetuating capitalist cultural conspiracy, an insidious institutionalized scheme for reaping the profits attendant to a planned obsolescence of wardrobes?

There is some, though not much, truth to both the boredom and profit-driven conspiracy explanations.⁸ (One finds elaborate reformulations of them throughout the theoretical literature of the social sciences.) What both explanations, and others I will take up later, sorely neglect, or at best grossly underestimate, is the importance of yet another factor in the complex social process we call “fashion,” that labyrinthine passage whereby an idea in the designer’s head is translated ultimately into the purchases and pleasures of the consumer. I have in mind social identity and its role in eliciting, channeling, and assimilating fashion’s code modifications. By social identity, I mean much more than the symbols of social class or status to which some sociologists are inclined to restrict the concept. I include within the concept’s purview any aspect of self about which individuals can through symbolic means communicate with others, in the instance of dress through predominantly nondiscursive visual, tactile, and olfactory symbols, however imprecise, and elusive these may be. In any case, the concept of social identity points to the configuration of attributes and attitudes persons seek to and actually do communicate about themselves (obviously, the two are not always the same).

How, then, do social identities relate to fashion? While space precludes comprehensive development of the thesis here, I would begin by noting that although we ourselves are actively (and, a good deal of the time, self-consciously) engaged in the construction and articulation of our social identities—we are not passive

8. Briefly, both explanations can be laid to rest by merely considering the following. If, as we have every reason to believe, boredom is universally part of the human condition, why is the fashion cycle so exclusively a product of Western civilization? It is absent from premodern folk and tribal societies; nor, for that matter, did it exist in other high cultures and civilizations of the past like those of ancient Egypt and China. As for the profit-driven conspiracy theory, this would be more persuasive were it not for the resounding fashion flops the putative conspirators manage to bring off on a fairly regular basis. At minimum it would appear that those they conspire against have some very telling things to say on whether they will or will not follow a new fashion. Social identities, I would hold, provide the frame for understanding what such “telling” is about.

recipients of identities ascribed to us by some remote abstract entity terms “society”—there are nevertheless strong collective currents that impinge on our sense of self at different times during our lives and at different historical moments (Stone 1962). That is to say, because we are subject to many of the same conditions of life, a great many of us experience in our persons similar yearnings, tensions, concerns, and discontents, which, regardless of how we apprehend them, seek some form of expression. It is in this sense that our identities can be spoken of as sharing a strong collective component (Klapp 1969).

I would hold with Blumer (1969a) that it is to these collective facets of our social identities that fashion addresses itself. And fashion can do so profitably (in both an aesthetic and pecuniary sense) because our social identities are rarely the stable amalgams we take them to be. Prodded by social and technological change, the biological decrements of the life cycle, visions of utopia, and occasions of disaster, our identities are forever in ferment, giving rise to numerous strains, paradoxes, ambivalences, and contradictions within ourselves. It is upon these collectively experienced, sometimes historically recurrent, identity instabilities that fashion feeds. The designer-artists who initiate fashion intuit somehow the currents of identity instability pervading a people and seek through the artful manipulation of the conventional visual and tactile symbols of clothing presentation to lend expression to them, or alternatively to contain, deflect, or sublimate them. To do so is necessarily to alter the clothing code in one or another way so that at some level of consciousness, if only subliminally, new, psychologically satisfying reflexivities can be evoked from potential wearers of the fashion.

From what is taken by most scholars to be the beginnings of an institutionalized fashion cycle in the West, namely, fourteenth-century Burgundian court life, up to the present, fashion has repeatedly, if not exclusively, drawn upon certain recurrent instabilities in the social identities of Western men and women.⁹

9. Some students, though, Steele (1988, 18–19) among them, locate the beginnings of fashion in the “protocapitalist” Italian city states of the early Renaissance, whence it is said to have spread to the Burgundy court. The problematic dating may reflect historical uncertainties in distinguishing the beginnings of fashion from the beginning of an institutionalized fashion cycle.

Among the more prominent ambivalences underlying such fashion-susceptible instabilities are the subjective tensions of youth versus age, masculinity versus femininity, androgyny versus singularity, inclusiveness versus exclusiveness, work versus play, domesticity versus worldliness, revelation versus concealment, license versus restraint, and conformity versus rebellion. Fashion's code modifications seem constantly to move within and among the symbols by which clothing encodes these tensions, now highlighting this, muting that, juxtaposing what was previously disparate, inverting major to minor and vice versa. But by whatever operation, when successful, fashion manages through symbolic means to resonate exquisitely with the shifting, highly self-referential collective tensions and moods abroad in the land. Indeed, in so doing it more than lends expression to them; it helps shape and define them as well.

2 Identity Ambivalence, Fashion's Fuel

For the truth of the matter is that people have mixed feelings and confused opinions and are subject to contradictory expectations and outcomes, in every sphere of experience.

Donald N. Levine, *The Flight from Ambiguity*