

6 Fashion as Cycle, Fashion as Process

The present fashion is always handsome.

Thomas Fuller, 1732

No matter how much we may come to understand it, it will probably always be a cause for wonderment that what begins as a “new idea” in a designer’s head, an idea at odds often with the reigning visual conventions of the time, can so swiftly not only disseminate to the public at large but be thought beautiful by it as well. For it is exactly this type of visual “conversion process,” often intellectual and emotional as well, that is of the essence of fashion. What was “in” is now “out”; what was attractive yesterday is dowdy today; last year’s model never looks right, and try as you may, there’s nothing you can do to it to make it look right; etc., etc. Countless other, equally clichéd statements could be summoned that reach for the same point. And despite our gnawing awareness at another level of the ephemerality, capriciousness, and duplicity of fashion’s blandishments, we more often than not, even as we resist them, succumb to them.

Why does this happen? *How* does it happen? I have so far given a good deal of attention to the first question, chiefly by highlighting the role of identity ambivalences in Western society for clothing communication and fashion innovation. It is now time to turn to the how.

THE FASHION CYCLE AND THE FASHION PROCESS

Both terms are widely and interchangeably used in scholarly, and even popular, writing on fashion. There is reason to distinguish them. The *cycle* can best be defined as the phased elapsed time from the introduction of a fashion (a new “look”, a new visual gestalt, a pronounced shift in vestmental emphasis, etc.) to its supplantation by a successive fashion. The *process* refers to the complex of influences, interactions, exchanges, adjustments, and accommodations

among persons, organizations and institutions that animates the cycle from its inception to its demise.

Both terms, of course require delineation, specification, and qualification if we are to understand what happens, and how it happens, during the course of a fashion cycle. While I shall not attempt to be exhaustive on the matter, some prominent features of the cycle and its attendant processes merit general discussion in this chapter. I shall also take up several of the more important social science theories that have been invoked to explain them. This, I trust, may serve as useful background to the detailed treatment in the next chapter of influences at play at successive stages of the fashion process, from inception to extinction.

The Cycle, Then and Now

A metaphor often employed for the fashion cycle compares it to waves in the sea (Brenninkmeyer 1963, 52–53). As one wave crests and begins to dissipate, new waves form; these, too, will crest and possibly overtake a prior wave. But what of the waves themselves? Do they all follow the same pattern, or do they vary in amplitude, speed, and force? Indeed, there are students (Grinding 1981; König 1973, 46) who maintain that, as on a roily sea, several different kinds of waves (long/short, large/small, major/minor, etc.) overlap at the same moment. Depending on what feature of the fashion repertory one is observing (e.g., silhouette, hem length, fabric, color, décolletage), a different wave pattern is likely to form. Thus in the area of the women's dress, for example, hem length and color emphasis will as a rule change more frequently than the basic silhouette, although even with this the magnitude of change from one season to the next can be quite erratic, at times pronounced and at other times minuscule.

So, while all may agree that fashion in dress is cyclical, there are many different points of view regarding the nature and content of its cycles.¹ This, it will be noted, is a problem that besets all cyclical

1. Whether fashion in other realms (e.g., the fine arts, literature, architecture, automobile styling, furniture, domestic pets, cuisine) is as cyclical or, for that matter, cyclical at all is somewhat problematic. Part, though not all, of the answer would depend on whether the institutional apparatus for structuring and sustaining a fashion cycle exists in these other realms. Clearly, the apparel industry is

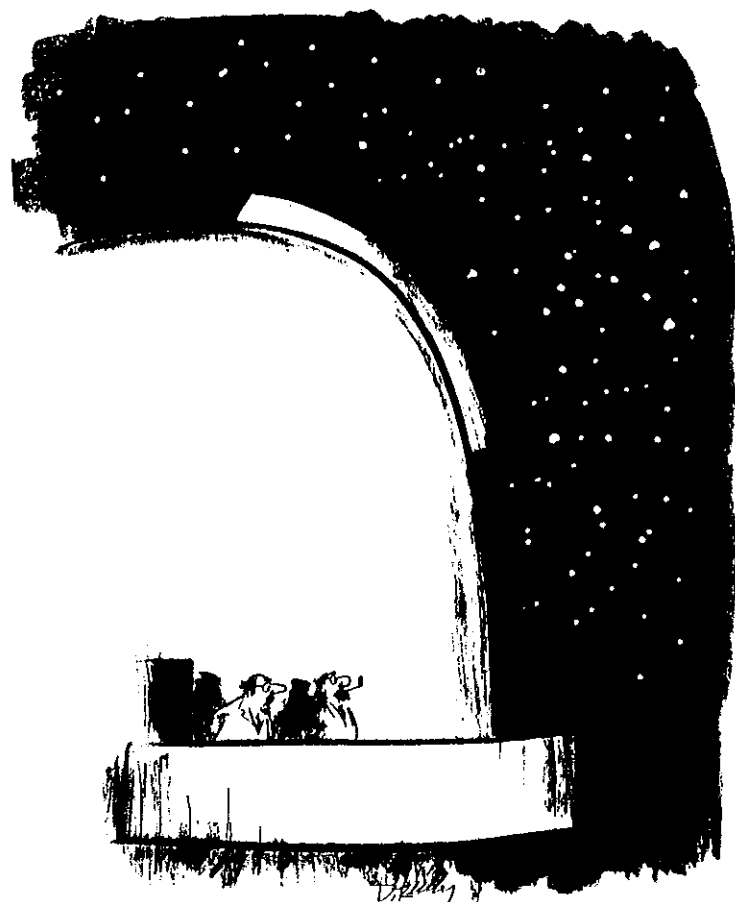
cal theorizing, from Spengler to the stock market. The search for some inherent or "natural" law above and beyond the vagaries of human agency that can explain every move and deviation in the cyclical pattern almost invariably runs afoul of history.² But, when the "law" attempts to accommodate history's eccentricities, it tends to lose its cogency; the litany of exceptions and adjustments overwhelms whatever generalizing potential the cyclical theory possessed initially.

Such absence of lawlike properties notwithstanding, some cautious generalizations do seem warranted in regard to the fashion cycle and the manner in which it has developed in Western society over some eight centuries. Students (Bell 1947; Lowe and Lowe 1985) generally concur, for example, there has been no break in the flow of fashion change since the thirteenth century despite variability in the duration of fashion cycles. Such a finding is by itself less interesting than what it suggests about the presence of certain structural and cultural continuities in Western society, which, despite profound social transformations over the centuries, continue to excite the changes in popular taste and sensibility that mark fashion. Some of these continuities, for example those deriving from an invidious status system and from the moral impress of an ascetically inclined Judeo-Christian ethic, have, as far as fashion is concerned, been dealt with in earlier chapters.

Further, there is (except for Lowe and Lowe [1985], who argue to the contrary) widespread agreement (Anspach 1967; Bell 1947; Brenninkmeyer 1963; Fraser 1981; König 1973) that the pace of the fashion cycle has greatly accelerated since the nineteenth century, most especially since the Second World War. The decisive development in the nineteenth century was the emergence of the independent couturier who designed clothes primarily for a market consisting mainly of upper-middle-class women, rather than, as had been the case previously, individual clients, typically women of the aristocracy or prominent haute bourgeoisie society

much further along in this regard than are the others, although there are students who suggest (Moulin 1984) the visual arts are rapidly approaching a similar condition.

2. In the study of fashion, Kroeber's (1919) quantitative analysis of several centuries of women's gown proportions survives as the *locus classicus* for this approach.



"I've never been able to figure out the cycle of the quiet disappearance and after an indeterminate interval the mysterious reappearance of men's trouser cuffs."

Drawing by D. Reilly; © 1989 The New Yorker Magazine, Inc.

figures.³ The English-born and -reared Charles Frederick Worth, who established his own design house in Paris in 1858, is credited as being the first of this breed (O'Hara 1986, 265). The fashion

3. Analogous shifts from aristocratic patronage to independent production for a broader, albeit class-restricted, market occurred, of course, in all of the arts during the nineteenth century.

cycle has not been the same since. Before Worth, the names of designers of gowns and other wear for aristocratic and bourgeois ladies were hardly known to the public at large.

Prior to the mid-nineteenth century it would often take decades for one dress style to succeed another. Following Worth a new dress fashion for women, with perhaps the most minor of alterations from season to season, would last typically for only the better part of a decade and on occasion somewhat longer. Today it is not uncommon for a new style to survive for no more than a season or two. Intensive capitalization and rationalization of the apparel industry, consumer affluence along with democratization and a loosening of class boundaries, and the greatly quickened flow of information via the electronic media are cited typically as factors accounting for the progressively shortened span of the fashion cycle. The idea has even been put forward (Davis 1979; Klapp 1969) that these forces, especially the mass media, have served to so quicken the cycle that it stands in danger of expiring altogether. Apropos, one fashion writer (Hochswender 1991a) was led recently to observe:

The cycles in fashion get shorter and shorter. How many times have the 60's been revived since the 60's? They're never out long enough to be completely out. Soon all the decades will overlap dangerously. Soon everything in will simultaneously be out.

The last observation touches on yet another alteration in the fashion cycle, particularly in that period since the Second World War, namely, the emergence of what is referred to as "fashion pluralism." The term crops up in several different contexts, making it difficult to attach a single referent to it. The underlying assertion, however, is that, in sharp contrast to what obtained until well into the present century, contemporary dress fashions are neither as universal nor as symbolically focal as they once were. Neither in women's nor men's dress today can a single fashion come to rule the roost as was the case with, for example, the crinoline, the bustle, the flapper dress, Dior's New Look, or the three-piece single-breasted man's suit. Nor do fashions today seem capable of enforcing uniformlike compliance throughout society and across all class and status groupings. Bell (1947) anticipated the point

glancingly when he claimed that since the last decades of the nineteenth century clothing, and its attendant styles, have become ever more specific with respect to occasion and activity: day and evening wear, business and leisure, town and country, home and office, seasonal wear, etc. Styles and fashions that dominate in one domain do not automatically carry over, or even necessarily influence, what dominates in another.

But much more has come to be implicated in the notion of fashion pluralism than the phenomenon of dress specificity. In conjunction with the wide-ranging critique of "trickle-down theory" (of which, more later) what is also implied is the passing—assuming it ever existed in quite the manner Veblen (1899) and Simmel (1904) wrote of it—of a hierarchically organized, symbolically consensual prestige structure in society, one in which all groups, classes, and coteries looked, however soon or belatedly, in the same direction for cues for what was to be thought beautiful, acceptable, and fashionable. This accounts for the unrelieved stylistic uniformity of many nineteenth- and early twentieth-century fashions as they descended through the class and status structures of society.

By contrast, students of fashion diffusion in today's world (Field 1970; King 1981) claim that a condition of fashion polycentrism prevails. Different socioeconomic, age, subcultural, ethnic, and regional groupings, no matter what their relationship to the "means of production" or the occupational structure of a society, adopt and frequently create their own rather distinctive fashions, some of which (e.g., blue jeans, punk-influenced hair stylings, oversized men's shirts worn by women, the man's earring, tie-dyed T-shirts, hippie beads, running shoes) soon spread, via lateral and even upward movement, to other subcultures and more inclusive social groupings.⁴ Nonetheless, in contemporary America, and particularly among younger age groups, fashions can become so localized that what is "in" at one high school or junior high is strikingly different from what is "in" at nearby schools in the same city (Louie 1987; Penn 1982; Rimer 1985).

4. See the extended discussion of denim blue jeans in chapter 4.

SOME THEORIES OF THE FASHION CYCLE

Implicated in the concept of cycle is, of course, some notion of phases, which as a rule are thought of as divided into, at minimum, a beginning, a middle, and an end. Such a delineation is most often accompanied by some causal scheme meant to explain how the phenomenon in question moves (or develops, or unfolds) from one phase to the next. And, so it is with fashion. A perusal of the extensive literature on the topic (see Kaiser 1985; Sproles 1985) reveals any number of alternative schemes by which the phases of the fashion cycle are conceived as well as a goodly number of theories to explain why the phases develop as they do. But to even contemplate the latter immerses us in questions of process; for hardly any of the theories is so naive as to conceive of the cycle as a *ding an sich*, unfolding inexorably by itself, wholly free of outside agency. On the contrary, nearly all of the theories propose some force or condition by which the cycle is animated and made to follow its phased course.

This said, it must also be noted that it is much easier to secure essential agreement among scholars on the phases of the cycle than on theories to explain them. Perhaps out of sheer logical necessity, all concur explicitly or by implication in one or another variant of the beginning-middle-end phase formulation.⁵ Substantive theories of the fashion process, however, range all over the map. As noted earlier in one and another connection, some see boredom as the well-spring of fashion change. Others emphasize sexual allure, sometimes specifying the conditions even further by referring to shifting erogenous zones. Still others take their cue from market interests, at times extending the theory to embrace notions of, at minimum, tacit economic conspiracies. A much-quoted aphorism of G. B. Shaw (Auden and Kronenberger 1962, 126), for example, has it that "a fashion is nothing but an induced epidemic, proving that epidemics can be induced by tradesmen."

5. In the subsequent extended discussion of the fashion process, I too employ such a scheme.

And, of course, there are the familiar, if characteristically vague, a posteriori, *Zeitgeist* theories.⁶

By far the most prominent *sociological* theory of fashion since the turn of the century, however, has been, as stated above, the trickle-down or, as Blumer (1969a) has termed it, "class differentiation" theory. Because of the great sway these interrelated ideas of trickle-down and class differentiation have exercised on scholarly and popular writing in the field, it is useful to consider the theory's limitations before proceeding to the next chapter's examination of the stages of the fashion process. For without this, there is a danger the theory's lingering—though, I would hold, distorting—appeal may skew the understanding of how the fashion process actually works in today's world.

Trickle-Down Theory, A Critique

As developed by followers of Veblen (1899) and to a lesser extent those of Simmel (1904), the trickle-down conception of the fashion process, as the name implies, holds essentially that fashion is launched at the top of the social structure and eventually works its way down to bottom stopping short perhaps of what Marx termed the *lumpenproletariat* but nowadays we usually think of as the "underclass." In the course of its descent what may have been aesthetically innovative about the new fashion is lost as stylings, in order to meet the economic exigencies of the mass market, become progressively vulgarized, or "tacky" in common parlance. As the fashion passes into the lower-middle and upper-working classes it is, of course, no longer fashionable. By then the upper class, especially its more fashion-conscious segment, has fixed on some new fashion. This, in turn, starts the cycle all over again.

Thus, trickle-down theory (in league often with intimations of a "clothiers' conspiracy") places preponderant emphasis on the

6. Or as Schucking (1944, 5) puts the matter so pithily in his critique of zeitgeist theories of literary production, "It is very easy to adduce as part of a demonstration the very thing that has to be proved. The spirit of the Gothic period, for instance, is first deduced from its art and then rediscovered in its art."

class differentiation functions of fashion.⁷ And certainly, there is and was much about civic life in Western society to lend plausibility to the emphasis. To paraphrase the theory's underlying reasoning (see Goffman 1951):

The class structure of society requires appropriation of symbolic devices by which social classes can distinguish themselves from each other. Clothing, generally, and fashion, in particular, lend themselves admirably to this purpose in that they afford a highly visible, yet economically strategic, means whereby those "above" can by the quality and "fashionableness" of their clothing signify their class superiority over those "below." Moreover, that those below come in time to emulate, however crudely, the fashions of the upper classes attests symbolically to the legitimacy of the patterns of deference inherent in a class system. I.e., those below demonstrate thereby a "proper respect" for their "betters."

Although neither Veblen nor Simmel referred explicitly to this process as "trickle-down"—a politically contentious term that found its way into economic discussions later in the twentieth century—there is ample evidence in their classic works of 1899 (Veblen) and 1904 (Simmel) they conceived of fashion essentially along these lines. In Simmel's essay on fashion (1904, 136), only the term itself is lacking:⁸

7. In almost a classic Parsonian sense, the theory is heavily structural-functional in its emphasis, discovering in "function" if not quite the sole, then certainly a sufficient, explanation for the phenomenon in question (see Parsons 1951).

8. Still, on balance, Simmel's rendition of "trickle-down" is more subtle and insightful than Veblen's. Veblen grinds away relentlessly on "conspicuous waste" and "conspicuous consumption" as the symbolic sine qua non of fashion whereby the leisure class differentiates itself from less advantaged classes. For Simmel, fashion, in addition to this societal function, at the interpersonal level affords a near-ideal mechanism for balancing several of the "contrary human tendencies" that figure so prominently in the corpus of his sociological writing (Simmel 1950), i.e., individualization vs. equalization, union vs. segregation, dependence vs. freedom, etc. What he had in mind was that fashion at one and the same time, allowed persons to express their individuality and afforded them the security of conformity with numerous similarly disposed peers. Or, as Sapir (1931) put the matter somewhat later, "Fashion is custom in the guise of departure from custom." Simmel (1904) was also unusually prescient in his analysis of the special position of the demimonde in the fashion process: While "its peculiarly uprooted form of life" permitted it to pioneer in matters of fashion, it could not on its own establish or legitimate a new fashion. That power was reserved for the upper classes.

Social forms, apparel, aesthetic judgment, the whole style of human expression, are constantly transformed by fashion, in such a way, however, that fashion—i.e., the latest fashion—in all these things 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.

More recent statements espousing trickle-down theory are to be found in Barber (1957) and Robinson (1961), although the latter modifies the claim by noting that within social strata diffusion of the new fashion is likely to be horizontal rather than vertical (King 1981).

Incident to the earlier discussion of the fashion cycle, one criticism of trickle-down theory has already been set forth, namely, its inability to account for the fashion pluralism and polycentrism that more and more characterize contemporary dress. The theory, however, is wanting on any number of additional grounds. (But in fairness, so are nearly all reasoned explanations of the fashion process, whether we call them theories or not.)

A most obvious shortcoming of trickle-down theory was touched on in the discussion of ambivalences of status (chapter 4). This is the reductionistic assumption that irrespective of the intentions of designers or clothes-wearers, fashion in the end is concerned solely with symbolizing social class. However, were we to follow the phenomenological (and commonsense) injunction of "turning to the thing itself," it is at once evident that clothes generally, and fashion in particular, communicate much more about the person than the social status he or she occupies or aspires to. As I have tried to show throughout this work, gender, sexuality, age ascriptions, leisure inclinations, ethnic and religious identifications, political and ideological dispositions, and still other attributes of the person can be in play in the clothes we wear. To isolate from this rich design a single, though admittedly important, element is to do violence to the phenomenon itself. It is not surprising, therefore, that even those who still seriously entertain the theory (McCracken 1985b) introduce numerous qualifications and additions that aim to expand its tunnel-vision view of fashion.

The theory's narrow symbolic focus is but part of a larger deficiency that plagues sociological theories of fashion generally, including that of trickle-down theory's most forceful sociological critic, Herbert Blumer (1969a). As I have discussed elsewhere (Davis 1982), whereas sociology may tell us a great deal about how fashion diffuses through a population (i.e., the structural outlines of the fashion process), it has thus far offered little by way of telling us what specific fashions *mean*, (i.e., the images, thoughts, and feelings communicated by a new or old fashion and the symbolic devices with which this is done). What does the shortened hemline or double-breasted suit mean to those who, cautiously, are among the first in their social circles to adopt them? How do these meanings, elusive or inchoate as they may be, relate to meanings that preceded and will follow them in the fashion cycle? Why do some new meanings (read, new fashions) "click" while others "fizzle"? Trickle-down theory, along with other sociological theories of fashion (Tarde's and Sumner's imitation theory, Konig's displaced sex urge emphasis, Blumer's collective selection formulation), reveals itself as peculiarly incapable of informing us substantively of how clothing meanings are engendered, communicated, and eventually dissipated. Yet it is this, after all, that lies at the core of the fashion process.

Doubtless there are those who in defense of the sociological enterprise would argue that trickle-down theory need not concern itself with questions of content; that, in accordance with the fundamental telos of the discipline, it is sufficient to delineate the structure within which the fashion process is contained and the abstract forms by which its manifestations can be comprehended. Indeed, some such distinction between form and content distinguishes Simmel's and later Wiese's (1927) formal school of sociology.⁹ This may account for Simmel's partiality to a trickle-down

9. In the sense that, for example, the social "form" superordination-subordination comprehends the "content" of such relationships as employer-employee, officer-enlisted soldier, master-slave, teacher-student, parent-child, etc. As for fashion, such dialectical processual forms as competition-cooperation, individuation-affiliation, and union-segregation should have been, in accordance with the dictates of "formal sociology," at the center of Simmel's analytical scheme. While these are alluded to in the landmark 1904 essay, there, as in much of Simmel's sociological writing, he (wisely, in my opinion) avoided applying them with rigor or consistency.

version of the fashion process, although in recognition of his genius it must be noted he was never one to be held intellectually captive to any circumscribed disciplinary doctrine, another's or his own.

This metatheoretical stance of sociology may well be altogether tenable logically. Each science purports to do some things and not others, and it is pointless to expect it to delve into areas lying outside its established boundaries. Still, whether it be via sociology, another discipline, or some mix of disciplines, the problem of meaning in clothing and fashion is so critical for an understanding of the fashion process that it needs somehow to be addressed. From the vantage point of humanistic learning, it is equally foolish to abandon it solely because it does not axiomatically fall within the recognized boundaries of some established discipline.

Finally, it is worth noting that for a theory conceptually so in tune with structural-functional approaches in sociology—fashion is said to “function” in behalf of sustaining the social stratification system of society—trickle-down, remarkably, barely attends to the complex of institutional, organizational, and market structures that channel and, at very least, mediate the fashion process. None would deny, for example, that the social construction of “seasons,” competition among designers and fashion centers (Paris, Milan, London, New York), the fashion choices of buyers for big American department stores at the fall and spring showings, the fashion press, merchandising strategies, etc., have a great deal to do with how fashion “happens.” Yet these palpable structural influences are hardly ever reflected in the formulations of trickle-down theory or, for that matter, in sociological writing on fashion generally. If considered at all, they are treated as something of a black box whose invisible operation serves solely to sustain and reproduce the social class system of society.¹⁰ Although, with Blumer (1969a), I hold strongly to the view that changing subjective aspirations and discontents of a people have much to do

10. In a well-known piece Bourdieu and Delsaut (1975) do examine the structure of rivalry and cooperation among Paris's top designers. Their aim, however, is not to illuminate the fashion process per se but rather to indicate how such rivalry and cooperation ultimately feed into the distinctive taste preferences of France's upper and middle bourgeoisie.

with the turns fashion takes—a view, incidentally, favored neither by trickle-down nor “economic conspiracy” theorists—this need not entail neglect of the role played by the institutional apparatus of the fashion industry in the fashion process. For it is certainly also the case that the fashion industry in its totality is necessarily deeply implicated in the apprehension, definition, diffusion, and dissipation of the collective moods and tensions that feed fashion. Whichever sociological theory of fashion one leans to, it would seem a better understanding of that industry than we now have is called for before a still broader understanding of fashion's place in the lives of modern peoples can be attained. Otherwise, the breathless clichés of the fashion press on the one hand, and on the other the easy, often snobbish or, at best, patronizing generalizations of social critics given to devalue fashion as trivial and culturally corrupting, are likely to continue to dominate discourse in the field as they have for too long now.¹¹

Blumer's Collective Selection Theory

In light of trickle-down theory's shortcomings, what sociological alternative is there? Perhaps the only other well-articulated, reasonably comprehensive attempt to conceptualize the fashion process is that of the late Herbert Blumer (1969a), who terms his approach “collective selection.” Designed in large part specifically to rebut trickle-down or class differentiation theory and incorporating many key ideas from the somewhat amorphous sub-discipline of sociology known as “collective behavior,” Blumer's formulation denies that hierarchical class relations animate the fashion process and that, in turn, fashion serves primarily to symbolically ratify those relations. Not that fashion cannot or does not ever serve the purpose of class differentiation, but this is at best

11. It is striking that, although one can locate hundreds of scholarly articles and books on fashion at any time, one almost never comes upon, for example, an ethnographic or other sort of close-in study of a fashion house, a fashion publication, store buyers, or a retail establishment where new fashions are sold. Some noteworthy exceptions are provided by Kovats (1987), who has published some material from her field research in a Paris fashion house, and Peretz (1989), who has reported on the selling of fashionable wear in Paris retail establishments.

only one purpose among many and, at that, of distinctly secondary significance in the context of fashion's overall sweep. As Blumer (1969a, 281) states the case:

The efforts of an elite class to set itself apart in appearance takes place inside of the movement of fashion instead of being its cause. The prestige of elite groups, in place of setting the direction of the fashion movement, is effective only to the extent to which they are recognized as representing and portraying the movement. The people in other classes who consciously follow the movement do so because it is the fashion and not because of the separate prestige of the elite group. The fashion dies not because it has been discarded by the elite group but because it gives way to a new model more consonant with developing taste. *The fashion mechanism appears not in response to a need of class differentiation and class emulation but in response to a wish to be in fashion, to be abreast of what has good standing, to express new tastes which are emerging in a changing world* [Blumer's emphasis].

In place, then, of a functional explanation finding fashion's source in some societal predicate of class differentiation, Blumer shifts the analytical ground to where more elusive states of *collective* mood, tastes, and choice are seen as critical. Perhaps the clearest statement to this effect occurs in the entry he wrote on the topic for the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (Blumer 1968):

Tastes are themselves a product of experience; they usually develop from an initial state of vagueness to a state of refinement and stability, but once formed they may decay and disintegrate. They are formed in the context of social interaction, responding to the definitions and affirmations given by others. People thrown into areas of common interaction and having similar runs of experience develop common tastes. The fashion process involves both a formation and an expression of collective taste in the given area of fashion. Initially, the taste is a loose fusion of vague inclinations and dissatisfactions that are aroused by new experiences in the field of fashion and in the larger surrounding world. In this initial state, collective taste is amorphous, inarticulate, vaguely poised, and awaiting specific direction. Through models and proposals, fashion innovators sketch out possible lines along which the incipient taste may gain objective expression and take definite form. Collective taste is an active force in the ensuing process of selection, setting limits and providing guidance; yet, at the

same time it undergoes refinement and organization through its attachment to, and embodiment in, specific social forms. The origin, formation, and careers of collective taste constitute the huge problematic area in fashion.

Some additional key points are put forth by Blumer (1969a) in his analysis of the fashion process:

1. He conceives of fashion as a *generic process* permeating many more areas of social life than that to which scholarly work and popular interest customarily confine it, i.e., clothing (women's clothing in particular). The susceptibility of an area to fashion's sway is inversely related to the degree to which its "competing models" can be subjected to open, objective, and decisive test. "It is for this reason that fashion does not take root in those areas of utility, technology, or science where asserted claims can be brought before the bar of demonstrable proof" (1969a, 286). Blumer himself, though, I am sure, would have agreed that even in science and technology what constitutes "demonstrable proof" is not always as clear-cut and unproblematic as one wishes; this, perhaps, helps account for the fact that it is by no means uncommon to hear scientists, engineers, and, certainly, social scientists speak of "fashions" in their respective fields. Indeed, his somewhat earlier "Fashion" entry for the *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* Blumer [1968] all but says as much.

2. Fashion is closely allied to modernity and intertwined with the "modern temper," with restlessness, an openness to new experience, and fascination with the new, viz., a rather generalized cultural predisposition to "keep abreast of the times." Thus, regardless of what happens to social class relations in contemporary society, whether they become more egalitarian or more steeply hierarchical, the domain of fashion is an ever-expanding one. "As areas of life come to be caught in the vortex of movement and as proposed innovations multiply in them, a process of collective choice in the nature of fashion is naturally and inevitably brought into play" (1969a, 289).

3. Although as one highly critical of "structural-functionalism" Blumer never attributes causality to fashion's "function" as such, he does see the fashion process as fulfilling a number of useful social purposes, which he refers to as its "societal role."

First, it "introduces order in a potentially anarchic and moving present," through collectively narrowing choice and selecting among competing models so as to reduce the likelihood of Tower of Babel effects (1969a, 290).¹² Second, it "serves to detach the grip of the past in a moving world" (1969a, 290), a world that requires people to be free to move in new directions. "Third, fashion operates as an orderly preparation for the immediate future. By allowing the presentation of new models but by forcing them through the gauntlet of competition and collective selection the fashion mechanism offers a continuous means of adjusting to what is on the horizon" (1969a, 291).¹³

I think it safe to say that students of fashion, much as they may differ with many of its details, would find in Blumer's scheme a more balanced, comprehensive, and felicitous analysis of the fashion process than that offered by trickle-down theory or, for that matter, most extant theories. As with so much Blumer wrote (see Blumer 1969b), one senses his rendition of "collective selection" to be much closer to what actually happens in the real world of fashion creation and diffusion. It rings truer to the complexities, ambiguities, and uncertainties that mark the emergent, and at least initially indeterminate, character of the larger social processes that simultaneously wear down and reconstitute the familiar fabric of the social order. Still, as with trickle-down theory, problems remain, though this time more through omission than commission. I will briefly allude to them here before attempting a stage-by-stage analysis of some of the many influences that activate, shape, and direct the fashion process in today's world.¹⁴

To begin, I would again note that, as are nearly all sociological theorists of fashion, Blumer is largely indifferent to what is com-

12. But, as noted, there are those who argue that with the spread of fashion pluralism and polycentrism a "Tower of Babel" is exactly what has come into being (Wolf 1980).

13. Some sense of what Blumer had in mind when making this last point (he, incidentally, spent time in Paris in the early 1930s studying fashion at firsthand) can be gleaned from the passing observation of an expert fashion reporter on viewing the latest Paris collections. "Paris is a kaleidoscope of styles and attitudes as designers search for a new look for the new decade. There is much talk of fashion's girding itself for the 90's, but there is hardly any agreement about what the main direction should be" (Morris 1990c).

14. For a fuller critique of Blumer's views on fashion, see Davis 1991.

municated by fashion. And in deference to his well-taken counsel to view fashion as a generic process, this indifference, by extrapolation, would extend to fashion in all things: in dress, architecture, music, household pets, or whatever (Davis 1982). That something of symbolic significance is being communicated to individuals and that its communication is realized through an interactive process that both apprehends and alters meanings as the process unfolds is a conceptual stance strongly held and deeply felt by Blumer. One would expect nothing less from the founder of the school of sociological thought known as "symbolic interactionism." Yet nowhere does Blumer offer a methodology for assaying what clothing's meanings are.¹⁵ (A corrective is found to an extent in the work of semioticians (Barthes 1983; Eco 1979; Enninger 1985) and clinical and social psychologists who have utilized projective tests of one sort and another to study clothing meanings.)¹⁶ As with trickle-down theory, with Blumer the analyst is left with a processual skeleton.

Beyond this there is the more general problem of vagueness in collective selection theory. Stages in the fashion process, whether real or meant to serve as analytical devices, are not differentiated and identified. Who the key actors are never emerges clearly. Although their presence can be felt, their appearance is like that of figures hovering in a conceptual darkness. They are not well-etched silhouettes capable of being targeted by the researcher. The guiding imagery is of some massive gaseous disturbance in which volatile elements of collective mood, taste, and selectivity ignite and implode each other so as to move the transformative process on to some largely unforeseen end. There is nothing particularly infelicitous about this metaphor when applied to fashion. (Anti-positivist and antiempiricist that he was, Blumer [1969b, 153-82] was, we know, quite partial to the notion of "sensitizing concepts," and doubtlessly much of what he wrote on fashion was intended in this vein.) Still, as one who has tried to build upon such imagery in my own studies of fashion, I can testify to how, in the absence of

15. Some important first steps toward filling this lacuna in the symbolic interactionist analysis of clothing were, however, taken by Gregory Stone (1962), a student of Herbert Blumer's. There has unfortunately been little followup on Stone's pioneering efforts in the area.

16. Kaiser 1985 discusses many such studies.

greater specificity, it is virtually impossible to account for the turns fashion takes.

Displaying the lingering impress of its origins in turn-of-the-century (Le Bon 1896; Tarde 1903) and slightly later (Park and Burgess 1921) collective behavior—"mass society" paradigms of social change, collective selection theory is, finally, quite ahistorical in its grasp of the fashion process. Searching for fashion's sources in the concatenation of current collective moods, discontents, and yearnings, it offers few if any clues on why dress and fashion in Western society have taken the directions they have over the centuries. The threads of what the student senses must ultimately be fashion's links to the relatively fixed and continuing class, gender, and institutional arrangements of society get lost somehow. Any ensuing analysis of a particular fashion cycle or cluster of cycles is, therefore, made to appear ad hoc, or worse yet bootless. Not that the missing links need be thought of as determining, as they usually are in trickle-down and Marxist theories (Fox-Genovese 1978). But given what we already know of the historical direction of, for example, class and gender dress in the West, it would seem the linkages, however attenuated or obscured at times, deserve more of a place in fashion's analytic equation than collective selection theory accords it.

Last, I would simply reiterate the point raised several pages back, namely, the failure of collective selection theory (along with trickle-down) to adequately consider the palpable influence of the elaborate institutional apparatus surrounding the propagation of fashion in the domain of dress. Blumer (1969a) is, of course, quite correct about the flow of fashion (generically conceived) in other areas of social life not being nearly as institutionalized as it is in clothing. This recognition by itself challenges those who would totally reduce fashion to the economic apparatus of its manufacture and promotion; for if such were the case, fashion would flourish as unabashedly in cookware, gardening, and building design as it does in apparel, which of course it does not. Granted this, it seems equally shortsighted to treat as unproblematic its intensive institutionalization in the realm of dress. That fashion has found its mansion there may be as much of a clue to its generic properties as is its diminished presence in other spheres of social life.

7 Stages of the Fashion Process

Fashion enthrones itself as something lasting and thus sacrifices the dignity of fashion, its science.

T. W. Adorno, 1981