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FASHIONING IDENTITIES

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NICOLA CATHERINE GREEN

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ABSTRACT

This research addresses the way in which individual and collective identities are constructed through fashions in the contemporary western world. The reciprocal and interdependent relationship of processually emergent identities, and fashion as a system of cultural representation, is initially established. The argument maintains that certain theoretical explanations of fashion have marginalised this component of the fashion process, and the aim of the thesis is to place the often contradictory junctures of fashions and identities in positions of central importance in the consideration of fashion dynamics. The argument critically reviews different feminist explanations of fashion, and the implications these have for feminist debates around gender and gender identity. The thesis further examines the sociological debates around modernism and postmodernism, and evaluates the contributions of this debate for both the study of fashion, and feminist understandings of identities. The research concludes that contemporary theoretical shifts in the investigation of fashions and identities are the fruition of a 'long revolution' in sociological theory and practice, which indicate important developments for the future resolution of critical problems in the theory of style and politics.

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I have named those who were unknowingly my workers and precursors...

Neitzche
The Will to Power

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CHAPTER ONE

IDENTITIES, FASHIONS, DIFFERENCES

This ambivalence is that of contradictory and irreconcilable desires... Fashion - a performance art - acts as a vehicle for this ambivalence; the daring of fashion speaks dread as well as desire; the shell of chic, the aura of glamour, always hides a wound.

Elizabeth Wilson
Adorned in Dreams

Fashion is an endless spectacle, a private and public theatre in which the play of mutable appearance incessantly redefines the self. In each facet of everyday life we see the unfolding performance of fashion's pageant, a process of dynamic inscription and recreation which transforms the body, the psyche and subjective life. The procession of media into the 1990s - electronic boxes of light and sound, black print and graphic image - document the increasingly chaotic and schizophrenic signs of style. Amongst the collapse of distinction between designer fashion and street style, fashion culture in the 1980s and '90s has proliferated as never before into texts and subtexts of retro, nostalgia, irony, parody, juxtaposition and bricolage. Carefully contrived fashion magazines have shifted from the representation of designer 'looks' to a new consumerism in which the array of style signals an exhibition of identity grounded in appearance. Fashion becomes an 'identity (i-D) parade' (Evans and Thornton: 1989) of spectacle and surveillance in which the signifiers of difference spread in exponential mutation.

The central question emerging from this dislocated morass of graphic image, is how individuals perceive a sense of self, through the mechanisms of fashion; a sense of

`being' in and consciousness of particular social locations. Does fashion enable individuals to `make a statement' about who they are through what they wear, or are individuals themselves `fashioned' by images presented in a media culture? Can groups express common values in their utilisation of different fashions? The subjective sense of `self' as an integrated person, an entity in interaction with other social subjects in groups which share similar characteristics, is (provisionally and in debate) referred to as identity. The central problem of this thesis is the relation of identities to fashions, and the means through which these are co-formative.

Fashion is a critical social and cultural site at which identity is negotiated, a field in which a constellation of differentiating processes merge and re-emerge. Identity is constituted in this difference, in the shifting demarcations and definitions of meaning which negate, designate, and represent. The networks of meaning which comprise cultures are created through the depiction of difference in opposition, placed in relation to junctures of other opposition. The creation of difference within and between selves, in the recognition of the self as in difference to the other, at points of juncture with the difference between selves and between others, creates the network of meanings which comprise identities. The individual in opposition to the collective, the natural as against the artificial, the material as against the ideal, the body in opposition to the psyche, construct the normative parameters of being in contemporary western society. Yet each aspect of opposition and differentiation is itself constituted in ambivalence and ambiguity, in the liminal and marginal positions of culture, in the points at which boundaries are contested and challenged.

The argument that follows is also framed by the struggle over difference. As text, it is discursively positioned in relation to diverse and sometimes contradictory analytical debates around the nature of the self, identities and fashions in contemporary western society. Within the context of this argument, identities (specifically in the plural) are generally understood as processes and practices of social interaction, as sets of social relationships that are incessantly open to renegotiation and redeployment. Fashions, especially in their articulation as images, are conceived as commodified forms of cultural representation which are simultaneously positioned as signifying practices in

cultural discourses. Identities and fashions are aligned in relationships of both difference and similarity, a process of convergence, coalescence and rupture at the points of representational juncture between a host of discourses around the individual, the collective, the economic, the corporeal, the psychological and the political. Identities are created and maintained through the vagaries of fashion, played through its signifying practices and deployed around its representations.

Identities are, however, simultaneously beyond fashion; their expressions are found in a multitude of social interactions in diverse historical and cultural contexts. Fashion is also concurrently greater than the sum total of subjective expressions found within its representational practices, and is different from the infinite range of social practices through which identities are maintained and transformed. Identities and fashions are constructed alongside each other in dialectics of positional negotiation which perpetually reinscribe the boundaries of difference. Neither individual/collective identities nor group/personal fashions can be considered prefigurative as such, but should instead be regarded as peculiarly intimate discursive practices at both the material and ideological levels.

The first chapter of this thesis explores the concept of 'identity'; the means through which identity has been conceptualised in the literature of social science; and the way in which identity has been conceived as constituted in ambiguous relationships of difference. Identity is not a thing-in-itself, but rather emergent processes-in-transformation; fragmentary social practices which ground the individual and the collective in contradictory and often paradoxical social and cultural circumstances. The constitution of collective and individual identity is in the representational boundaries of likeness and difference, in the moment at which the other is recognised in similarity to the self, and the self may become the stranger. Identities as continually emergent processes negate neither structuring forces of power nor the practices of individuals, but rather specify points at which the individual is interpellated, where identity is positioned rather than structured, momentarily 'fixed' rather than determined. The boundaries between these aspects of opposition are always in question, contingent both experientially and theoretically. Identities are

therefore ambivalent, caught between opposing, contradictory and oscillating subjective states of attitude, approach, desire and power. This text addresses, in theoretical terms, the contingencies of experience.

Fashion is a particularly appropriate means through which to trace the paradoxical vagaries of identities, as fashion is itself an ambivalent cultural form, infused with contradictory desires and activities. It is a particularly precarious and elusive phenomenon to theorise because it refers to more than one set of social practices and behaviours at any one time. Fashion is simultaneously art and mass pastime, work and play; a signification of both reality and fiction, banality and theatrics. It is both producer and product, ubiquitous yet specific; and is concurrently both an intensely individual ideal and a mass hallucination, a collective practice and an individualising culture. The analysis of fashion therefore not only includes close scrutiny of the multiple aspects of social life of which fashion forms an integral part, but similarly those aspects of fashion apparatus and practice which are informed by the interaction of social dynamics in the formation of self. Fashion so closely integrates the body and the psyche in a social self that it becomes a sartorial space where many different ideas, ideals and discourses meet. Neither identity nor fashion are determining, but are instead adjuncts associated in largely indeterminate relationships of creation and transformation. Identities and fashions therefore cannot be analysed through simple reference to any singular academic discipline, nor simplistically incorporated into any number of wider academic or cultural discourses which necessarily seek to explain fashion through explanations centred in differential social dynamics which ignore fashion's own fluctuating logics.

Many explanations of fashion have marginalised the centrality of identities in fashion's movements. Fashion is often characterised as the irrational and ephemeral expression of more determinative social phenomena, rather than as a social and cultural process that is always 'relatively' autonomous. A critical review of social science literature on fashion establishes the singular and univocal disposition of many writers towards the interdependence and contradictory processes in formative practices of fashion and identities. Identities and fashions are however, as I see it, plural and

interactive rather than singular phenomena, and thus require forms of theorising which acknowledge experiential ambivalence, indeterminacy and ambiguity. While it is arguable that social theory is itself largely indeterminable (Levine:1985), the analysis of identities and fashions requires perseverance in the face of cultural and theoretical vacillation. The final section of the first chapter addresses important theoretical debates on the character of social relationships as both structured and multiple, and discusses the implications of theorising identity in fashion for the conceptualisation of identity more generally.

The way in which fashion is theorised - in all its ambiguity and ambivalence - has important implications for the conception of 'identity', and the implied relationship between the self and cultural artefacts in wider social contexts. A theoretical form is needed which at once acknowledges ambiguous processes in identities and culture, but at the same time explores the possibilities presented by contingent points of intersection with foundational theory on the left. At once, this notion raises the spectre of politics; the question of whether politics requires some sense of 'identity' on which political activity must be predicated. Theorising is inherently a political activity, based as it is on the dynamics of power-as-knowledge. Attempting to specify the junctures at which identities are positioned within cultural networks further implicates the specification of power relations within those networks which establish the cultural as political. While this argument generally concentrates more upon fashion as a critical site of identity formations and the means through which these are conceptualised, the notion of identities as multiple and ambiguous immediately problematises the realm of politics. The recognition of identities as constructed through political interventions is therefore an important contributing factor within the argument: however, given the considerable scope of debate around identities and politics within sociological literature, the question of politics necessarily remains a problem - a range of interrogations in this particular context - rather than an inventory of resolutions for theory and politics more generally.

Gender and gender identity are contentious concepts within sociological and feminist debates around the nature of 'the political' and its relationship to social analytics.

Chapter Two introduces the notion of gender as an integral component of identity processes, especially in relation to the positioning of the feminine other in fashion's catalogue of difference. The discussion argues that the concept of gender has developed a specifically foundational definition and usage within the (predominantly feminist) literature pertaining to processes of gender and gender identity. Gender has often become a singular and monolithic category with which to understand complex social and historical processes, and this applies to the analysis of fashion no less than it does to the feminist literature of gender more generally. A perusal of various feminist explanations of fashion identifies, in different aspects, the difficulties apparent in the deployment of gender identity as a foundational component of feminist social thought. If identities are considered essential by virtue of their basis in personal experience, an unquestionable 'hierarchy of oppression' is established which dictates the parameters of both political 'correctness' and ideological division.

A significant number of feminist scholars are, however, challenging a politics of exclusion and moralism predicated on abstract identity hierarchies; a politics similar in form to that of the institutional practices and prejudices that feminisms seek to criticise. There are genealogies of emergence in different feminist theories of subjective identities which are attempting to grapple with the indeterminacy of gender dynamics and the ambiguity of philosophical thought in relation to the unstable concept of gender. Ambivalence, ambiguity, fluidity and contradiction are emerging as central tropes in the analysis of the socially 'fashioned' self. Different feminist theories of fashion, considered throughout the discussion in both fluid and 'ideal typical' form, demonstrate cross-currents of feminist thought which variously specify disparate and conflicting philosophical assumptions around 'identity'. The argument proposes that the most useful feminist approaches to the question of fashion are those that acknowledge a prevailing ambiguity in fashionable cultural forms, while preserving a concern with the means through which individuals are positioned in fluctuating social relations of power. The final section of Chapter Two investigates the implications these positional explorations have for feminist theories of the subject, and the creation of feminist narratives which recognise the provisional and relative character of identities across specific political, cultural and historical contexts.

Prompted by the consideration of feminist theories of the subject, the argument necessarily returns to a reconsideration and extension of the debate around politics and identities initiated in the previous chapter. If the category of 'gender identity' can no longer be considered stable, feminist politics become problematic. Questions regarding the fundamental basis of feminist politics become central, as does an interrogation of the relationship between feminist theories of the subject and feminist politics. The formidable proportions of these debates preclude any comprehensive consideration of their possible resolutions however. The discussion rather focuses specifically on those elements of the discussion which might be central in future feminist examinations of fashion as a highly ambiguous cultural site in which identity is positioned and reformulated.

Most recently, the recognition of dislocation and fragmentation in identities - both within feminisms and beyond - has been framed through and around the debate between modernism and postmodernism. This is particularly the case in consideration of contemporary fashion, often cited as the epitome of experiential postmodernity in its display of irony and parody, its concern with surface, style and image. The discussion throughout Chapter Three challenges the parameters and substantive issues of the interchange between the protagonists of postmodernism and the defenders of modernism on several counts. The argument discusses various paradigmatic and axiomatic definitions of theories of modernism and postmodernism, modernity and postmodernity. In the course of this discussion it becomes apparent that the definition or representation of both 'modernism' and 'postmodernism' becomes artificially monolithic and singular through the process of theory constructed in opposition. This organisation ignores not only the ambiguity intrinsic to those representations which appear univocal, but contradicts the analysis of social knowledge (as a criticism of 'meta-narratives') to which 'postmodernism' is purported to adhere. The argument is not that any particular position which is described as postmodernist is erroneous *per se*, but is rather to suggest that social theory cannot conceive of the postmodern in any generic sense. We cannot define what postmodernism 'is', as it 'is' as ambiguous as any other theoretical or cultural form. Positions characterised as 'postmodern' include such divergent modes of thought as Lyotard's (1979/1984) 'little narratives',

Derrida's (1978) deconstruction, Irigaray's (1985) morphological symbolism, Jameson's (1983,1984) marxism and Kroker and Cook's (1987) excremental culture. These different texts can be no more simplistically conflated into paradigmatic form than can a criticism of one be assumed as a criticism of any other. Furthermore, these challenges apply equally to the different forms of thought standing in opposition to postmodernism, usually termed the modernist. The terms of the debate, then, are terms that are questionable; when specific junctures or interrelationships between fashions and identities are taken as the central points in analysis, the simplistically constructed opposition between postmodernism and modernism is found insufficient in understanding the potentially endless permutations of position, and the **specificity** of each prevalent configuration of shifting identities.

What, then, are the implications of these criticisms for feminist social theories of relational and provisional gender (and other) identities in the schizophrenic world of fashion? The continuing discussion in Chapter Three centres around the possibilities of specific theories, often characterised as postmodern (but not necessarily accepted by their authors as such) for the development of a feminist epistemology of ambiguity and ambivalence. In the final section, I argue that feminisms and postmodernisms - as unstable and plural categories - conjoin at certain useful premises, even if these junctures are rather troubled. Creative insights have, I think, emerged from the attempted integration of postmodern thought by the contemporary left. Feminisms are questioning their own terms of reference in relation to the postmodern, resulting in a simultaneous affirmation and breaching of previously stable conceptual categories such as identity, gender and difference - in the field of fashion as much as any other. Some of the most productive literature on fashion emerging from the connections between the political left and theories of postmodernity, are those attempting this dual project; the consideration of simultaneous fixity and fluctuation in identities and fashions on the one hand, and on the other an awareness of specific political problems and questions which are implied by indeterminate theories of the subject. Dick Hebdige (1979,1988), Caroline Evans and Minna Thornton (1989,1991), and Angela McRobbie (1989,1991a) for example, have variously theorised the implications of fashion/politics, the latter two in direct relation to feminist thought. A reading of these

specifically 'ambiguous' texts suggests a productive agenda of theoretical and empirical research in the study of identities and/in fashions, and offers directions in the debate around the social subject as the political subject in sociological thought.

The final chapter summarises the thesis and focuses attention again on its central themes. To posit social identity as intimately (although not singularly) constructed through cultural forms such as fashion, is not to imply that subjective identity is **determined** in any final sense. Identities are produced and 'generated' rather than ultimately established in foundational form. Identity, as a predominantly ambiguous **effect**, is neither structured in a determining sense, nor entirely arbitrary and/or fictitious. Thus, to assert the construction of subjective identities through social and cultural mechanisms is not necessarily to subscribe to a structural determinism of which agency is the antithesis. As Butler (1990:147) argues, '(c)onstruction is not opposed to agency; it is the necessary scene of agency, the very terms in which agency is articulated and becomes culturally intelligible.'

Conversely, however, theories of identities in fashion must somehow strive to specify points of difference in representation - the social sites at which identities become 'frozen' for an instant in social patterns of power and domination - and at the same time recognise these junctures as open to fluidity in meaning and interpretation, subject to material and ideological positioning, debate and challenge. The conceptualisation of identity as **emergent**, as **effect**, opens foundational identities to question; it might specify particular points of interpellation in systems of power, but continues to question the ways in which identities change in specific social, political and cultural contexts. If the political is situated within those processes and signifying practices which maintain and regulate identities, then the political project becomes one in which the experience of ambiguity, ambivalence and indeterminacy in identity is exemplified in the means by which it is described, explained and enacted. This enterprise is highly problematic, and certainly contentious in both theoretical and political terms. On the one hand, for example, feminisms are struggling to integrate the multiplicity of subject positionings open to social identities, while maintaining a political basis somehow configured around 'women' as a social group. On the other

hand, feminisms attempt to specify the distinctive localities at which women's identities are structured in social relations of power and domination, while simultaneously theorising a plurality of cultural and political practices.

ADDENDUM

Within every narrative, there is a counter-narrative of silence and absence in which the first is always grounded. This narrative is no exception. It arises out of the processes of identity which mark myself as both narrator and subject in a historically specific space, and as such those silences which I (the signifier which denotes an individual both enabled and restricted through its construction, open as ever to renegotiation) might identify in this moment should be explicitly recognised.

Within the politics of identities, the voice of others, black voices (an identity constructed through politics, rather than a politics based in identity), have been growing stronger in recent years. The black critique of racism, of marginalisation, of imposed silence - directed at both normative social science and at the feminist movement - has begun to retrieve and reconstruct the lost histories and narratives of many of the myriad of black experiences, black subject positions and black identities. The (particular) positions of women of colour within the context of fashion and style; the means through which specific dynamics of fashions become aspects of the recovery of black consciousness and the ongoing reconstruction of black identities; the means through which black identities are positioning fashion and its dissemination throughout the representations and significations of identities in fashion, remain largely unaccounted within cultural studies fashion literature. Black feminisms and black 'women' in particular are an integral component of these relationships, and should be recognised as such both within the academy and beyond. This thesis contains little discussion of the way ethnic identities are constituted through and expressed in the dynamics of fashion and style, simply because there is a paucity of research within the academic institution in these areas. These silences then, black

silences, might be recognised as present, but should be made explicit. There are other absences also. Lesbian women, women with disabilities, older women, and others that have yet to be identified, are all marginalised within the text for much the same reasons as those of ethnic voices. Fashion is somehow considered inapplicable to these different groups in the normative sense, they are considered 'outside' of fashion's discourses and signifying processes by social science and/or feminism. These narratives too, should be recognised in the text as marginalised.