

# Style over substance?

## Fashion, spectacle and narrative in contemporary US television

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Previous scholarship on fashion and film has debated the aesthetic role played by onscreen costume. Yet there has been little exploration of fashion and its use in television. Existing work on fashion in onscreen media has approached the debate from a textual perspective, and such work has been informed by the longstanding assumption that fashion acts primarily as 'spectacle', disrupting the economy of narrative flow. This article seeks to challenge this assumption by arguing that previous work is limited by the wider conceptual and methodological problems of purely textual approaches. Using CW's *Gossip Girl* as a case study, the author suggests that a mixed-method approach to the study of costume (using both textual analysis and reception studies) provides a more productive foundation upon which to begin to examine the function of onscreen fashion in contemporary US television. Such an approach may have particular importance in understanding how costume in 'fashion-forward' television can be best understood if one steps beyond the text to explore the sense-making of viewers, the intentions of costume designers and the relationship between viewers, the shows and the wider fashion market.

An article about the US network CW's *Gossip Girl* (2007–) recently appeared in the fashion and style section of *The New York Times*. The article claimed that the show 'has always been more than a television series about its overt subject, the social machinations of Manhattan private-school students. It has also presented a cavalcade of fashion' (La Ferla, 2008). *Gossip Girl* has been likened in the popular press to other recent 'fashion-forward' shows, including *Sex and the City* (1998–2004) and *The O.C.* (2003–06), which are seen as having the ability to influence future fashion trends. As the following discussion will also illustrate, fashion-forward shows serve a promotional function, given that both their textual and extra-textual circulation have strong links to education about, and consumption of, contemporary fashions. Within these shows, fashion is often no longer relegated to *mise-en-scène*, but becomes central to the narrative itself, and to extra-textual discussion of such programming by viewers.

Previous scholarship regarding the uses of onscreen fashion is primarily concerned with film (see Gaines, 1990; Cook, 1996; Bruzzi, 1997; Gaines, 2000; Street, 2001). There has been little exploration of fashion and its use in television, despite the emergence of fashion-forward shows such as those mentioned

above. The few studies that have examined fashion in a television context have attempted to transfer previous work on fashion and film without substantial re-imagining or revision, thereby failing to take into account the economic and industrial specificities of television form. Furthermore, the existing body of work on fashion in film is informed by the long-standing assumption in film studies that spectacle acts as a distraction, disrupting the economy of the narrative flow. Previous studies of fashion and film, therefore, have tended to view fashion as either expressive of narrative and characterisation, or as excessive spectacle, detrimental to narrative progression (see Gaines, 1990; Bruzzi, 1997; Street, 2001). The concepts of spectacle and narrative have been weakly defined, and it is clear that the precise meaning of 'distraction' here requires further interrogation. In addition, the analysis of the relationship between fashion, spectacle and narrative has traditionally functioned at a textual level, and I suggest here that this has been limited by the wider conceptual and methodological problems of purely textual approaches, the most often cited being the evacuation of the audience, and the suggestion of a rather deterministic and homogeneous reading of audience response.

Within previous studies of fashion and film then, there has been a tendency to overlook the importance of the viewer and more general questions of reception, yet these issues seem integral when making assumptions about the way in which spectacle is *interpreted* in a text. As complex reception studies make clear, it is possible for viewers to extract multiple readings of a single text, therefore the suggestion that fashion is read as spectacle and 'disrupts' narrative, can surely only be substantiated through reception studies, which requires analysis beyond the text itself. As such, it is crucial to look not only at the text, but the inter and extra-textual discourses which surround it.

This article seeks to offer an alternative approach to the study of onscreen fashion and its relationship to narrative, using US television show *Gossip Girl* as a case study. Not only does *Gossip Girl* serve as a useful case study of a fashion-forward show, but also – as this discussion demonstrates – it offers insight into contemporary television viewing practices, given its substantial online audience (which, according to press reports, comprises the most desirable demographic for advertisers: women aged between 18 and 34), and the participatory practices of audiences on the show's accompanying websites. These developments in contemporary television-viewing experiences further support the need for an alternative methodological approach which looks beyond the show itself.

I begin by summarising the key debates on fashion and film, arguing that previous scholarship has relied upon somewhat problematic assumptions about

screen hierarchies; narrative is privileged above visual style, and this hierarchy is then in turn shaped by gendered discourses of cultural value. The article goes on to suggest that a mixed methodological approach to the study of costume (using both textual analysis and reception studies) provides a more productive foundation upon which to begin to examine the functions of onscreen fashion in contemporary US television. In the final section, I argue that extra-textual material surrounding *Gossip Girl* (press articles, interviews with creative personnel and viewer's comments posted on the official website) would suggest that viewers and the show's costume designer do not read the onscreen fashion in *Gossip Girl* through the opposition that fashion is either expressive (of narrative and characterisation) or excessive (working against narrative flow). Rather, *Gossip Girl* (and its subsidiary website) provides a space in which a dialogue regarding fashion and its relationship to self-identity can take place.

### Fashion and spectacle in film

A significant body of literature explores the relationship between film costume and narrative, and it is this which has largely functioned to structure debates about how costume and fashion function in onscreen media. In her influential article 'Costume and Narrative', Jane Gaines (1990: 181) argues, in relation to classical realist cinema, that all aspects of *mise-en-scène* serve 'the higher purpose of narrative'. She claims costume in the classical era was motivated by characterisation, and that it was essentially required to remain 'subservient' to narrative demands. Failure to do so could 'distract the viewer from the narrative' (Gaines, 1990: 193). Underpinning this argument is Mulvey's canonical concept of 'the gaze'. Just as Mulvey (1989: 19) has argued that 'the presence of woman [onscreen] [...] tends to work against the development of a storyline [and] freeze the flow of action', Gaines asserts that costume that is not adequately motivated by character could also result in a disruption of narrative, 'breaking the illusion and the spell of realism' (Gaines, 1990: 193). Inherent within Gaines's work, then, is the assumption that notions of distraction are gendered. Costume and fashion are coded as feminine in opposition to narrative, which, in being implicitly positioned as active, logical and forward-thrusting, is clearly coded as male. This has certainly raised wider questions within feminist scholarship of power and gender politics; is the notion that females are inherently distracting to be read positively as subversive, or is this simply rendering women as objects of the male gaze? But with regard to Gaines's argument, there is the suggestion that if costume and fashion function as spectacle,

this is aesthetically inappropriate, as they should ultimately remain subservient to the narrative.

Subsequent scholarship is also informed by this assumption (see Wollen, 1995; Bruzzi, 1997; Street, 2001; Berry, 2000), entering into a debate that is primarily waged at the level of the text. However, I would argue that there are problems in thinking about costume in these terms. Firstly, there is an inherent assumption that spectacle and narrative are somehow antithetical. To be sure, although this has been a longstanding assumption in film studies, this dichotomy has gradually been questioned. For example, productive enquiries into the relationship between spectacle and narrative with regard to action cinema illustrate that often, 'narrative and spectacle "intermesh" in action sequences' (Romao, 2004: 143). In addition, Pearson and Messenger-Davies's (2003) discussion of the *Star Trek* films highlights the importance of the audience in defining discourses of narrative and spectacle. They observe that 'the same shot may be seen by some as pure spectacle and by others as having a narrative function' (Pearson and Messenger-Davies, 2003: 109).

Therefore, the notion of fashion as distracting spectacle is perhaps overstated in existing work, which has almost exclusively relied on textual analysis. While textual analysis can provide evidence to suggest that certain costumes are to be *read* as spectacle (see Herzog's (1990) discussion of the fashion show in film), it is beneficial to take into account some of the extra-textual discourses that surround the text in order to understand the way in which fashion and its relationship to narrative is received and critically evaluated. This allows us the opportunity to examine the ways in which discourses of screen hierarchies are constructed and perpetuated. That said, it is not my intention to evacuate the text entirely, since it is important to examine how costume operates within its original context. Indeed, it is then possible to explore the precise ways in which the text intersects with extra-textual material, enabling us to employ a more multidimensional and holistic approach to re-examining previous assumptions about the relationship between spectacle, costume and narrative. Furthermore, I would argue that this approach is becoming increasingly important in relation to contemporary television such as *Gossip Girl*, which relies upon a complex series of relationships with online intertexts. For example, an article in *New York Magazine* describes *Gossip Girl* as having 'a life of its own online' (Pressler and Rovzar, 2008):

Not only do fans watch the show on their computers, but they post sightings of the actors on gossip blogs and exchange rumours (about both the show and its stars) on fan sites. You can even play *Gossip Girl*'s Upper East Side [a virtual online game of the show] on Second Life. It's not appointment television; it's a 24-hour conversation. We are all *Gossip Girl*! And the whole experience can happen *sans* television.

As this passage demonstrates, the viewers of *Gossip Girl* are encouraged to engage with a variety of associated media, which resultantly affects their reception of the show. This is not to suggest that similar activities do not occur in relation to film, but given television's longstanding relationship with onscreen advertising, sponsorship and endorsement deals, it appears that this process is intensified.

### **Fashion and spectacle: alternative methodological approaches**

It is pertinent to note here that the debate over the relationship between text and extra-textual circulation has equally been waged in the context of genre studies. In particular, Jason Mittell's article (2001: 5) argues that media scholars traditionally 'consider genre primarily as a textual attribute', which often produces a vague and ultimately futile understanding of genre. Instead, he suggests that 'we need to look beyond the text as the locus for genres and instead locate genres within the complex interrelations among texts, industries, audiences and historical contexts' (Mittell, 2001: 7). He claims:

we should gather as many diverse enunciations of [a] [...] genre from the widest possible range of sources, including corporate documents, press reviews and commentaries, trade journal accounts, parodies, regulatory policies, audience practices, production manuals, other media representations, advertisements and the texts themselves. (Mittell, 2001: 9).

Like genre, fashion as costume exists in a framework of discourses that can be located beyond the text. Shows like *Gossip Girl* are increasingly reliant on fashion to attract viewers, and as such, magazine articles, internet blogs and websites contribute to promoting onscreen fashion outside of the text and can, as Klinger (1991) argues, affect the reception of the text. Klinger claims that the filmic text operates to encourage the viewer to call upon information obtained from extra-textual material and at times digress from the unfolding action onscreen. She writes:

A host of promotional forms such as media stories about the stars, the director and the making of the film, which arm the spectator with background information [...] fall into relation with moments of the film being screened. (Klinger, 1991: 119)

While Klinger's concept of digression is discussed with regard to cinema, it demonstrates the value of examining extra-textual material and the way in which it offers productive insights into the spectator-text relationship, which is, as previously discussed, integral to contemporary television viewing practices.

This, together with the increased speed and coverage of the internet, has blurred boundaries between text and intertext.

### TV threads: spectacle and narrative in 'quality' television

In the conclusion of her book on costume and cinema, Sarah Street (2001: 103) rightly observes how a 'potentially productive area [of study] is a consideration of costumes in television'. She claims: '[w]ith its assumed affinity to realism, the *mise-en-scène* of television drama has rarely been examined with the thoroughness of film analysis' (Street, 2001: 103). Indeed, discussion of television drama has largely revolved around character and narrative. The comparative lack of exploration of *mise-en-scène* is perhaps, in part, due to the notion that the televisual image is secondary to the cinematic image. This understanding of the televisual image is informed by the medium's specific conditions of production and consumption. For example, television's connection to realism (hinted at by Street), screen size, picture resolution and domestic setting all contribute to the notion that television and spectacle are antithetical. As such, questions of spectacle and narrative have rarely been addressed in relation to television. In addition, the spectacle-as-distraction debate may not have initially seemed applicable to television given that early conceptions of TV viewing – such as John Ellis's (1982) claims that television is *always* watched in a distracted way, or Raymond Williams's (1975) work on television flow – suggested that television reception is constantly disrupted by commercial breaks. However, as Williams's and Ellis's work has been heavily criticised, an investigation into fashion, spectacle and narrative television is overdue.

Excluding Bruzzi and Church Gibson's work on fashion in *Sex and the City* (2004), there appears to be an assumption that costume does not, or rather should not, function as spectacle in television, despite the fact that recent developments in quality programming are increasingly foregrounding the importance of visual style. While in the 1980s the term 'quality television' was associated with a specific collection of (mostly) UK programming that was considered culturally legitimate (such as costume dramas, the work of Dennis Potter and so on), I am using the term to describe a host of contemporary US programmes that boast a connection to the 'cinematic' (see Jancovich and Lyons, 2003, McCabe and Akass, 2007).<sup>1</sup>

1. *The Sopranos* (1999–2007), *Six Feet Under* (2001–2005), *Sex and the City* and *Lost* (2004– ) are often cited as examples of quality television.

Indeed, the most recent manifestation of quality programming has greatly impacted upon costume design in television at the level of production. Higher budgets and a greater critical respect have resulted in an increased number of high-end designers seeking placement in quality shows. Previously, television costume designers used both high street fashion and their own designs. However, an article in fashion trade paper *Women's Wear Daily* (Ginsberg, 2000) acknowledges that in the contemporary period:

[d]esigners strike their own deals with the television stylists. This practice used to be the domain of mostly moderate and contemporary labels. These days, companies as sophisticated as Prada, Tod's, Jimmy Choo and Burberry are falling over themselves to get clothes on *Sex and the City* and other programmes.

This suggests that prior to the emergence of quality programming, television's low cultural status was seen as detrimental to the preservation of a high-end designer's image. The low cultural status of television resulted in high-end designers affiliating themselves with cinema as an alternative advertising platform.

The economic and industrial changes to television in the contemporary era also affect the relationship between costume and narrative. While writing on fashion and film suggests that costume should remain subservient to the narrative, it appears that within more fashion-forward programming, traditional screen hierarchies are challenged as fashion becomes central to, and enmeshed within, the narrative. For example, Patricia Field, costume designer of *Sex and the City*, claimed in an interview for *Women's Wear Daily* that 'we work side by side with the script people. They started in the second season to write for our wardrobe' (Field cited in Kerwin, 2000). Not only does this indicate that, in the case of *Sex and the City*, narrative does not dictate the wardrobe; it also challenges the notion inherent in previous scholarship that narrative and spectacle are antithetical. Here, the writers for *Sex and the City* consider fashion as an *essential* part of the narrative economy. With regard to notions of spectacle and the audience, the fashion in *Sex and the City* is often cited as one of the main appeals of the show, and this was not as a result of its realism. As Amy Sohn (2004: 67), author of the show's official companion book, claims: 'the clothes can be so fantastical it can be hard to believe that anyone would wear them in real life'. Similar claims have been made in relation to the fashion on *Gossip Girl*. A documentary about the costume design on the show reveals that costume designer Eric Daman was tasked with creating a hyper-reality in which the fashion would be spectacular. This documentary appears as a special feature on the DVD box set of *Gossip Girl* (Season 1), and is an important intertext

to consider when examining the way in which fashion is understood within the show.

### Undressing *Gossip Girl*: fashion, spectacle and narrative

The final section of this discussion uses *Gossip Girl* as a case study to exemplify the ways in which examination of extra-textual material increases our understanding of how fashion works in relation to narrative. Specifically, I use *Gossip Girl* to re-examine the assumption that fashion as spectacle causes narrative disruption, and to demonstrate that the extra-textual discourses that surround television shows not only provide us with a new lens through which to examine and assess whether fashion is considered a narrative disruption by viewers, but also offer a much more nuanced account of precisely *how* and *why* the narrative is disrupted, if at all.

Adapted from Cecil von Ziegesar's young adult novels of the same name, *Gossip Girl* depicts the lives of a group of privileged teens growing up in New York City's Upper East Side. While the show has achieved moderate viewing figures, *Gossip Girl* has 'an uncanny ability to affect style trends at large' (Kinon, 2008). In a *New York Daily News* article, Rick Haskins (Executive Vice-President of Marketing and Brand Strategy for CW Network) claims that there are

well over 3 million page views a day on the *Gossip Girl* site, and its fashion page is one of the most popular destinations on CWTV.com [...] All the time we get, 'I wish I had so-and-so's wardrobe [...] I wonder where I can get that outfit.' (Haskin quoted in Kinon, 2008)

The fashion page of the *Gossip Girl* site allows viewers to search for clothes and accessories that have featured in the show, by brand, episode or character. In addition, Daman created his own internet blog, which allows viewers to contact him directly to find out where they can buy the clothes that appear on the show and includes video posts of him in the *Gossip Girl* fitting room. Both the official *Gossip Girl* site and Daman's blog facilitate the active involvement/participation of viewers, enticing them to seek out costumes that appear on the show. Therefore, as Haskin's comments imply, the popularity of the *Gossip Girl* fashion page suggests that the fashion resonates with the viewer beyond the text. Furthermore, it would seem, the show itself and the subsidiary websites complement one another in order to encourage some form of distraction, or perhaps a digression among viewers for commercial means.

This report in the *New York Daily News* illustrates that from an industrial perspective, the fashion in *Gossip Girl* is central to the survival of the show, sug-



gesting that the show seeks to satisfy fashion conscious audience members, who are considered valuable. Haskins claims:

It's those people who are obsessed with the fashion of *Gossip Girl* who are going to be talking about the show all the time [...] They are going to be the show's ambassadors to people who may not have seen it. (Haskin quoted in Kinon, 2008)

Haskins' comments reveal that as opposed to previous accounts of fashion and film, the fashion in *Gossip Girl* is required to exist independently from narrative and characterisation, and serves to attract a valuable fashion conscious audience.

Indeed, when analysing the textual features of the show, it is evident that certain narrative situations require fashion to be prominently foregrounded. For example, one of the subsidiary characters, Jenny Humphrey (Taylor Momsen), attempts to launch her own fashion label in Season 2. In the episode 'There Might Be Blood' (Season 2, episode 6), Jenny hosts a 'guerrilla fashion show'. The fashion show scene has no dialogue. Instead diegetic punk music accompanies the fast-paced edits between close-ups, long and medium shots, low and high angle shots of the fluorescent pink and yellow garments against a dark background. The fetishistic shots of fashion in this scene primarily seek to please fashion conscious viewers. However, this is not to suggest that fashion works against the narrative, given that the fashion show is part of the narrative. This scene is not atypical of *Gossip Girl*; another fashion show takes place in the episode 'The Serena Also Rises' (Season 2, episode 5), which is set during New York fashion week. Similarly, another recurring narrative trend in *Gossip Girl* is the use of photo shoots. In the episodes 'Bad News Blair', 'It's A Wonderful Life' and 'Pret-a-Poor-J', Serena (Blake Lively), Blair (Leighton Meester) and Jenny take part in fashion photo shoots that draw attention to the on-screen fashion. These particular examples suggest that, as in *Sex and the City*, fashion functions as both spectacle and narrative. In the cases of both *Gossip Girl* and *Sex and the City*, fashion is part of the narrative and is commented on and debated by the characters in the show. As such, the fashion in both shows performs an almost pedagogical function, educating consumers about personal style and appropriate and inappropriate uses of fashion. This is then further developed by the subsidiary websites and gossip blogs, which enable the viewer to exercise their learned skills in fashion consumption.

While *Gossip Girl's* narrative is at times preoccupied with fashion, the show continually uses spectacular costume that is not contained by plot. Often, scenes that take place in the everyday locale of the school are as stylish as the fashion shows and photo shoots mentioned above. For example, a recent article

in *Vogue* (Stanley, 2009: 198) considers *all* the costuming in *Gossip Girl* as spectacle. The journalist writes:

The characters wear designer clothes that teeter between unattainable chic and self-parody, be it Bass [Ed Westwick] wearing a tuxedo covered with paillettes that shimmer like a matador's suit, or Blair's attending the dean's party at Yale with an Alice-in-Plunderland pewter-coloured satin bow in her hair.

The two examples of costuming singled out are typical of *Gossip Girl*, and as the passage makes clear, they are considered to function as spectacle. In both of these cases, the costume is not essential to the narrative, and unlike the fashion show scene described above, these particular examples are not explicitly referenced within the dialogue, nor do they form part of an ongoing storyline. Whereas Gaines has previously argued that 'costume is eclipsed by both character and body at the expense of developing its own aesthetic discourse' (Gaines, 1990: 193), the costuming in *Gossip Girl* has its own aesthetic discourse in which costume as spectacle is not considered a problematic distraction but rather an additional audience pleasure.

In the same *Vogue* article Blake Lively comments: 'the fashion is just unbelievable. You can watch our show on mute and be entertained.' (Quoted in Stanley, 2009: 168) This comment is reminiscent of Edith Head (a renowned costume designer in the early Hollywood era) and her understanding that costume should 'carry enough information about characters so that the audience could tell something about them if the sound went off in the theatre' (Gaines, 1990: 188). However, whilst Head's comment demonstrates a preoccupation with serving narrative and characterisation, Lively's illustrates that the fashion in *Gossip Girl* is primarily spectacle. Lively's comments are also echoed in the online forum. In a thread that allows *Gossip Girl* viewers to post their questions for Daman, numerous participants acknowledge the importance of fashion on the show, without making reference to its narrative function. In addition, the questions on the thread are preoccupied with characters' style, favourite designers and requests for certain outfits/colours to be used again (one participant writes: 'I've noticed Blair looks AMAZING in pink. Will we continue to see the rare pink colour on here and there' [sic]), suggesting that the onscreen fashion is not bound up with narrative and characterisation, but that rather the fashion is a jumping-off point for discussion and debate about broader issues of self-identity. As such, there is evidence to suggest that with regard to *Gossip Girl*, the extra-textual discourses seek to present a screen hierarchy that does *not* privilege narrative over spectacle. Instead, there is a passive dismissal of this hierarchy, resulting in a legitimisation of spectacular onscreen fashion that functions as a catalyst for broader discussion and debate.

## Conclusion

The main aim of this article has been to suggest an alternative methodological approach to the study of fashion, spectacle and narrative in television. While this study has highlighted some of the limitations of textual debates regarding fashion and film, it was not my intention to dismiss textual analysis entirely, for as Glen Creeber (2006: 84) has argued: 'Textual analysis on its own is rarely enough, but when it combines with the wider contextual or "extra-textual" nature of the subject, it can still offer insight and inspiration.' Moreover, this article has demonstrated a need to revise existing studies of fashion and film scholarship so that we might begin to think more widely about the function of fashion in television. While I have suggested some of the specificities that require consideration in revising previous studies, this is by no means an exhaustive account. For example, in this article I have focused on contemporary US quality television, but significant re-imagining would need to take place if one were to examine the use of fashion and spectacle in non-fictional programming.

The conceptual model I propose here could also be applied in more historical studies of television costume, as looking at extra-textual discourses allows us to consider the historical and national contexts in which texts were produced and consumed. However, while enquiries into the past are undoubtedly productive, I would suggest that the recent emergence of fashion-forward programming on prime time television, and the ways in which traditional screen hierarchies, notions of gender and cultural value and the relationship between programming and fashion-based consumption are being challenged and negotiated, invites timely scholarly attention. The analysis of *Gossip Girl* in this study only *begins* to illustrate the possibilities of a more multidimensional approach to fashion, spectacle and narrative. Yet despite this, it is already possible to question whether apparently traditional screen hierarchies that privilege narrative over spectacle are being renegotiated.

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