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Fashion As: Communication, Pop Culture, and Philosophy

Fashion, unfortunately, has been attached to many negative and dismissive stigmas. It has been viewed as being superficial, demeaning, and unworthy of our time. If one is fashion conscious, they are seen as being fickle and dumb.(Barnard,2). Those who get involved in the fashion culture are seen as people who are selling out and encouraging the conformity and consumer obsessed behavior of society. However fashion has far more worth than many people would like to admit and it is something that we should take notice of. Fashion has involvement in many aspects of our life whether we recognize it or not and has become a powerful entity as one of the biggest focal points of our media today. There are numerous TV shows, publications, and online outlets dedicated to it. Fashion is also important in that it is embedded with and produces different philosophical views that are valuable and pertinent in our lives. Finally, fashion is significant in that it is one form of communication and allows us to express our identities. Through the use of communication, pop culture, and philosophy, we can better understand this phenomenon that we have previously overlooked as penetrating our everyday lives and furthermore can use fashion to help us better understand these other disciplines as well.

According to John Durham Peters the definition of communication contains certain elements. For one, communication is sharing an inner experience without materiality of words. It is a blanket term for symbolic interactions. It is also a mechanism in which human relations develop. Communications is the process of reconciling the self and the other (Peters,8,9). By

definition, fashion easily fits in this role as a means of communication. Although fashion is nonverbal, it is spoken. In fact, clothes are assembled similarly to sentences thus creating our ensembles. When the article of clothing exists alone, it certainly does not convey the same meaning as when different combinations are made. According to Alison Lurie there are even different languages of dress, each with its own vocabulary and grammar. This language is then used to express concepts and meanings (Barnard, 27). One cliché way to exemplify this is when we are getting ready for a particular event or occasion and want to look appropriate. Sometimes we may ask our friends or family what the outfit “says” to them so that we may get an idea of whether or not the outfit is suitable.

Words are derived from context and we are always inventing new words. Just as in learning any other language, we come to create meanings based on certain associations. Ferdinand de Saussure described these signs as the basic unit of language. It is made up of a sign which is a mental image, that we have about the signified, or concept in question (Buckingham, loc 4408- Kindle). Although these may be arbitrary analogies, we use these signs and connect them with certain aspects of the outside world. According to Dick Hebdige, “Each ensemble has its place in an internal system of differences which fit and correspond with a self of socially prescribed roles and options (Brand, 257). For example, we have come to equate people in most business environments as dressing very professionally, generally in a suit. Language is malleable similarly to fashion in that it is interchangeable and works based on a common understanding.

To create successful communication, it is important that there is a cohesion amongst the intent of the sender, the efficiency of the transmission process, and the effect on the receiver. As John Durham Peters also wrote, we are constantly trying to connect the gap between ourselves

and others. Sometimes we are unsuccessful when trying to bridge this gap and come out with unintended meanings(Peters,14). This would conclude an error during the transmission process, and therefore the receiver would not interpret the message correctly. Relating this back to fashion, both the person wearing the garments and the clothes themselves have their own roles to help signify the meaning. Fashion is notorious for being used as a method to express political statements. One instance would be the case of the skinheads. A shaven head could mean a number of things, however using corresponding clothing related to certain social movements allows spectators to understand the intent.

Another key way in which we communicate is through the media. Nowadays especially, the fashion industry consumes what we see in the media whether it be on TV, online, or through print magazines. There have even been numerous films made as commentary on the industry. *The Devil Wears Prada* would be one example. However what it communicates does not necessarily portray fashion in a positive light. It is important to note that the film is centered around a fashion magazine. The magazine, as a form of media, is able to dominate the trends. The magazine is known to be responsible for the coming out of notable designers, and the resource in which girls look up to for their fashion knowledge. They have a significant influence in shaping a consensus reality of what is popular within the diegetic world. Miranda Priestly is the neo-cortex of this operation. However her methodology of getting things done neglects to recognize empathy for her employees. The movie overall reinforces the prevailing ideas that the fashion industry is brutal to workers and superficial in nature. Everyone in the office is seen as completely materialistic, and snobbish. They are seen as condescending and dismissive to anyone who they believe to be inferior.

Mark Matousek described how narratives tell us a story by popularizing a story. The importance of recognizing the message conveyed in this particular narrative of *The Devil Wears Prada* is because it helps to shape our consensus reality outside this fantasy world as well. Through this form of entertainment and other films and stories like it, an image of an unforgiving environment is perpetuated. Other similar notions come soon after. People see this and it helps them form opinions on what things in the industry must really be like. When people do not interact with something for themselves, they are left with the opinions of others to help form their hypotheses. There is a discrepancy between reality and this fantasy world. Memes relating to fashion also constantly poke fun at the subject as well. Rarely are they sincere in supporting the industry. What is problematic is that these memes can transcend time and replicate virally, further spreading the negative connotations associated with fashion. It unfairly damages fashion's general reputation. What should be taken into account is, "Truth is different from truth and consensus reality is not the truth" (Matousek, 93). Some of the positive examples of how the media communicates to us through fashion is representing a glamour culture and giving people, especially women, something to aspire for.

As much as people would like to condemn fashion, one thing that it essentially communicates is a fundamental and crucial part of ourselves, our identity. People try to often separate how we dress ourselves from having any real bearing on who we are. In fact, those who put too much effort into styling themselves are even found inferior to those who don't because their focus is on something artificial rather than intellectual. Academia is one specific example that is notorious for their lack of a fashion sense. Many of the people in this category are perpetuating this type of idea that fashion is unnecessary. People in academia and others who

distance themselves from fashion try create the impression that they are taken too seriously to buy into these tendencies, and that the mind is really the only thing that matters. To return to *The Devil Wears Prada*, I find it interesting that Andy as a well educated character, is scrutinized for entering the fashion world, and even diminishes the values of the industry herself. Miranda however pointed out that these people think that they are making a choice that exempts them from fashion, however they are part of a long chain of events that a product of the industry goes through.

What we put on our bodies is one way in which we show people what we are like on the inside. Dress communicates personality, mood and interests. Matousek wrote “self image is largely based on the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves” (Matousek, 79). Fashion is certainly part of this story and in many ways can help in shape our story. For example, a persons exterior can impact the type of career path that he or she may become involved with. Barak Obama would most likely not have become president if he was full of tattoos and wore dread locks. As stated before, our society has already deemed certain fulfillments for each place, career, or class. A part of these requirements is a proper dress code. We are not bound to dress in certain ways however whatever we choose can dictate where we end up.

Our sense of dress is also instrumental for shaping our lives because it attracts certain types of people around us. People who dress similarly most likely believe that they share commonalities. There is an assumption that because they have a similar taste in clothes, they may agree in other aspects as well, including shared hobbies, beliefs, and values. Fashion allows this type of communication and turn an individual into a member of a community. These groups are living in a shared reality. Part of a consensus reality is what is trending. Trends are often in a

rotation, much like peoples opinions and they are quick to change. People can identify with the ever changing fad or prefer to remain on the outside and follow their own inclinations. As mentioned earlier, even those who resist becoming involved in fashion end up creating their own tribe with a similar code to follow. Many groups formed based on these terms and where they fall along this spectrum.

Committing to one of these tribes has an impact on how we look at ourselves. Growing up, I am sure we have all been told that we shouldn't judge a book by its cover. Yet, that is all we seem to do. People who believe that fashion is insignificant and that we are only evaluated based on what we know are blinded by an inconvenient truth. What we wear has a notable impact on how we are perceived by others. We judge people based on what they are wearing because we relate certain clothes with certain kinds of behaviors and have judgements based these categories. In some ways this could relate to the idea of moral dumbfounding. We have no concrete basis to make assumptions about people based on what they are wearing, but we have an "instinctual" gut feeling that logic cannot explain. We begin to self police ourselves because we are worried that we will fall out of line with our peers. Gossip is a form of policing. It is very easy to pick apart someone based on their exterior because it is right in front of us and doesn't require much thought process. "People in all societies gossip, and the first rule of life in a dense web of gossip is: Be Careful What you do", or in this case what you wear (Matousek, 82). It is true that for most people the goal is to stay out of the crossfire of gossip.

Fashion really is interesting in that it is both something that could require an extreme amount of thought, or really none at all. I suppose that it is hard to say whether the left brain or right brain dominates. On one hand, some people really put an extreme amount of thought in

how they dress or design clothes. People prefer certain types of fabrics, color combinations, or devote themselves to certain designers. Other people prefer complete free expression and let the clothes dictate them. They create creative ensembles for no particular reasons. Either way we are forced to make choices and these choices have consequences.

Fashion has a significant relationship to the body. Sometimes we mold our bodies to agree with certain fashions, take for example the corset. Sometimes people consciously dress to mask their body type, such as someone who is overweight trying to conceal this by wearing loose fitting clothing. It also is one of the ways in which we create our immediate impressions of people especially relating to class and gender. However this alliance with the body is part of what degrades its value in the eyes of many people. One common view is that our body is inherently flawed and that we cannot trust it. The body coincides more with right brain thinking in that it stands apart from logic and primarily relies on intuition. The right brain, as being more aligned with feminine thinking degrades women in a sense that we are seen as loose cannons without a reasonable thought process. We rely too much on our bodies. We adorn our bodies through fashion, and since women are more involved in the industry than men, they are also condemned. Yet one thing that is ignored is that the body in essence is what interprets non verbal communication, not reason, logic, and intellect. "We understand our bodies and the power of thought upon our bodies when considering how our life stories grow"(Matousek, 90). Fashion should not be attacked but rather looked at with a balanced mindset.

The left and right brain come into the conversation again when talking about rationalism vs materialism. Sometimes people would prefer to look at clothing as a utility just for functional

purposes. However others really take the time to follow trends and keep up with their favorite brands. It may not seem as the rational idea to spend thousands of dollars on a pair of shoes that will most likely get destroyed, yet it is seen time and time again. It is likely that buying this expensive merchandise will buy social currency, and buying another way to communicate oneself to others. Brands are recognizable for a reason. No one with an interest in fashion would misconstrue the meaning behind a red sole as being Louboutin. The thought of being respected and recognized is endearing. People cannot help themselves no matter what reason and the left brain try to say.

Life becomes a cycle of packaging certain ideas about yourself whether they are true or false to maintain a consistent image. Or one a consistently create a changing image. Sometimes we can “try on” different personalities. We can essentially become any one we want to be through our clothing. This idea is particularly represented on Halloween. Although it has become quite commercialized, it gives people a chance to be someone else, without judgement. Sometimes people may feel constricted in their social groups and feel a pressure to dress in a certain way. They may feel as part of a conformed society that is constantly repetitive. On Halloween, there are *almost* no standards and you can assume any new identity that you wish.

I believe people like to think that our identity is easily flexible and can be fixed through fashion. That may be why we are so obsessed with the makeover genre. There are countless media outlets that insist that identity can be reworked, improved, or dramatically altered. Expenditures on clothes, cosmetics, and accessories are some of the necessary investments for the more desirable self(Gallagher). We have even involved these makeover concepts into “reality” TV through shows like *What Not to Wear* and *Extreme Makeover*. This would definitely

be an example of the sensitized culture of reality, giving people the idea that there are “rules in fashion” that we must follow to fit in. One case in point of this type of nonsense would be how ridiculous the notion is of being forbidden to wear white after labor day without risk of looking foolish. These types of “rules” were meant to be broken. What becomes evident to me is that our identity may not be something cohesive and putting too much thought into it may become counter productive. People who spend so much time thinking about all the rules involved, and worry about what people will think fall into a tradition of conformism. Identity is an illusion within a reality that we are always in a constant process of mending. Matousek regarded the idea that we all have an ego, and want to be liked and respected (Matousek lecture). However maybe there is an inherent true self that longs for self expression, and people may take advantage of this through clothing.

Fashion is a place in our reality that we can control and truly immerse ourselves in. It is engaging, empowering, and filled with unlimited options. This is one of the very few realms in which women dominate and are key players. Connecting back with the themes of left and right brain as well as masculine vs feminine notions, I think it is interesting to point out Miranda’s role as the editor of *Runway* magazine. Although she is seen as extremely fashion forward and dresses femininely, her personality is quite masculine. Miranda is quick to make decisions and sometimes is regarded as emotionless. She is a strong character that knows exactly what she wants. Throughout the movie, she embodies the epitome of the industry and is a striking balance between both these gender mentalities.

Also within this world as mentioned earlier, there are many communities. Sometimes people don’t verbalize their attachment to certain groups yet consciously or not, I believe they

make up a fan group. Theoretically in common descriptions of fandom, fashion doesn't necessarily align seamlessly. Often times, fandom is more associated to something specific like a particular band or movie. However Johnathan Grey expressed how there really is not one master narrative of fandom (Grey, 9). Therefore I think that the definition could be stretched to include fashion. People could be fans of a certain style, brand, designer, or even a celebrity endorser. Like other types of fandom, within fashion fandom there are also stereotypical hierarchies and subcultures. People who prefer luxury designers and have expensive taste are most likely to consider themselves superior to those who indulge in more affordable and vintage finds. There are also people who find them in between, and strike a balance between the luxurious and expensive as well as the more affordable clothing. Those people who see themselves as being on top are elitist and wouldn't necessarily attach the word or identify themselves as "fans", because it would water down the perception of the sub culture and even of the individual. There is a sense of divide amongst the types of fans and the types of qualities in the clothes. High quality fabric means better quality and therefore meant for the "better" consumer.

Irwin's argument of the stigmas attached with high and low cultures definitely relate. As he mentioned, pop culture as apposed to high brow art was created to solidify and legitimate class distinctions(Irwin, 6). One example would be how people sporting Louboutin are often associated with having wealth and taste, and consciously may portray this image to differentiate themselves from those wearing something from Walmart. This goes back to the issue of identity and how people attempt to shape themselves out of general perceptions. Another hierarchy would be those related to the media. We consider high brow media to be that in print and the lowest form would be electronic media available to the masses. What I find interesting is viewing these

hierarchies on both lenses. For one, a Print edition of *Vogue* for example is seen as something prestigious and highly regarded. They are seen as a tell all or necessity in the fashion world. However their website is not seen in the same light and is used as a quick fix and time filler. It is definitely more accessible but not nearly as inspiring as what is found in the print edition. The print and internet editions are clearly meant for different audiences and parts of the hierarchy.

What could be found in every form of the hierarchy and agreed across all fans is that fashion is inherently beautiful. It is more than something we use but is an ends in and of itself. This again is part of Greys claim that cultural judgements are detached from fandom (Grey, 5). People who love and support the industry refuse to buy into the ignorant claims made by outsiders who many times criticize it based on exaggerated fallacies. Irwin described how “Aesthetic pleasure can suggest metaphysical religious transcendence to a higher realm of reality. We can find pleasures through our senses (color, shape etc)” (Irwin, 144). Fashion is able to encompass all of these areas. For people involved in the industry and for many others it is even considered sacred. Fashion is an important example of art that is more relatable to us than any other form. “If fashion and clothing, which fall under the category of art, are part of the ways in which the world is created, experienced and passed on, there is no separate reality. The contrast between art and reality can be seen as a false meaning” (Barnard, 44) As stated in *The Devil Wears Prada* “What these designers do is better than art because you live your life in it.” As any other art, our enjoyment of it is subjective, private, and individualistic. No one has the same exact taste in clothes and even within certain groups there are variations and exceptions.

Despite our uniqueness, an aesthetic experience gains intensity from a sense of sharing something meaningful and valuable together (Irwin, 145). This is pertinent when examining the

fashion culture in the ways how people long to be involved. Grey described that the media is a common meeting place for fans that cater to the fans interests. There are countless fashion blogs, and fashion shows so that we have a chance to interact with one another. Fashion Week and Fashions Night Out were created for people with this genuine interest to engage and socialize with one another. Fashion has become a key focus among pop culture. Now, it is common to create celebrities out of fashion designers. We even recognize magazine editors. Just as Miranda Priestly from the film, *Vogue* editor and chief Anna Wintour also has high acclaim from the public. Everyone knows who she is and can respect her work. The limits are endless.

We popularize so many ideas from the industry and incorporate them into our daily lives. For example we draw inspiration from films and magazines in how to dress everyday. We can also draw inspiration from everything else around us including other cultures, nature, past generations, and other individuals we may or may not know personally. We can then use these influences and add our own twist to create a fusion of multiple looks, creating something that is exclusive for that individual. Fashion is a medium that is can always be built upon and transformed. It is exciting because you almost never know what to expect.

Whatever side of fashion debate you fall on, we should all still admit that it is something important that should be recognized. "Fashion is a way in which social order is communicated, experienced, explored and reproduced"(Barnard,36) Similarly to art and entertainment, fashion should not be trivialized because it contributes to the maintenance, meaning, and enrichment of life (Irwin,145)..Fashion becomes involved in so many conversations that are beyond its assumed arbitrary nature. Fashion can be used as an example to discuss our epistemological realities, communicate identities, and entertain us. It has so much more value that because of

traditions and a prevailing consensus reality, we choose to ignore. It is time we step out of the matrix and begin to realize objectively what the nature of this reality is.

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