

## **Fashioning Society: Introduction**

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### I.

For many, fashion still has a bad name: it is fickle and superficial, ephemeral and transient, feminine and flashy. This, it seems, denotes everything that good literature, works of art and culture in general should not be. In an example of such reasoning, a review of the poetry of contemporary Irish writer Eavan Boland criticises her writing for paying too much attention to fashion: "In all the beauty of Boland's pictures it is the substantiality of [the] truth beneath that I begin to miss. She is superb at presenting us with the wrappings, the bandages, the face-paint of her women [...]. But what of substance, of 'truth' lies beneath her obsessive fabrics?" (Byron 1987/88: 50) One of the poems the critic might have had in mind when forging her critique is Boland's poem "Making up" – a poem about cosmetics, a rare topic for poetry.

Traditionally, 'make-up' has been used as a symbol of artificial, un-natural beauty, hiding a woman's true identity. Jonathan Swift's "A Beautiful Young Nymph Going to Bed" (1731; cf. Scholz 2004), for example, reveals (some) men's fear that what they get might not be what they see. However, it is this distinction between inner true kernel and outer artificial shell that Boland's poem turns on its head. The speaker puts on her make-up and lets the reader know:

I look  
in the glass.  
My face is made,  
it says:  
  
Take nothing, nothing  
at its face value:  
Legendary seas,  
nakedness,  
  
[...]  
it's a trick.

(Boland 1980: 36–38, l. 29–41)

The poem can be read as a counterpart to the one immediately preceding it in the collection where it was first published. "Exhibitionist" calls up the traditional concept of the artist as stripping to the truth: "This is my way – / to strip and strip"

“out of clothes / that bushelled me / asleep.” (*ibid.*: 31–35, l. 31–2, 15–7) This agenda is disrupted by the poet-speaker’s ironic self-laudation: “What an artist am I!” (l. 16) Rather than bringing the naked truth to light, she reveals something much bleaker and darker: “my dark flush / nude shade, / hush // of hip, / back bone, / thigh // blacks light / and I / become the night.” (l. 34–42)

“Making up” presents a constructive alternative to formless nakedness:

The truth of this  
wave-raiding  
sea-heaving  
made-up  
tale

of a face  
from the source  
of the morning  
is my own:

Mine are the rouge pots,  
the hot pinks,  
the fledged  
and edgy mix  
of light and water  
out of which  
I dawn.

(l. 44–59)

The above mentioned critic would probably expect to find the true identity of the ‘I’ *behind* the make-up, *after* it is removed in the evening, when the woman can finally be *herself* after a long day of making and dressing up, and, apparently, denying her true self. Instead, Boland presents identity as being made up from make-up.

While it is make-up in this poem, the interest in clothing and fashion is pervasive in Boland’s other poetry. We read of *satin* and *gaberdine*, of *worsted* and *cambric*, of *silk*, *linen*, and *cotton*, of *gansy-coats*, *ankle-length summer skirts*, *skirts of cross-woven linen*, *denim skirts*, *bridal skirts*, *marriage quilts* and every other form of textile one can possibly think of (cf. Boland 1987). These poems must disappoint a reader who expects poetry to reveal a hidden truth. More like an actor – the only case in which a man is allowed to put on make-up, otherwise he would seem queer – the speaker in these poems finds herself, or himself, only *after* s/he has put on make-up and clothing. This identity happens on stage, in front of an audience, in the world of society and culture – not in a private and apparently natural sphere. This identity has to be performed in front of others, using the material and semantics a given culture has to offer. This identity is differential rather than representational, it exists only within a tightly woven network of meaning, not outside of society.

The articles in this special issue deal with the semantics as well as the material limitations the world of fashion has to offer in our culture, its possibilities and obligations when it comes to the creation of identities. These inquiries take into account both the medial effects on sign systems and the semantic formation of matters material. Clothing is an epitomic object for such studies: it is both a means of communication in itself and dependent on textual and iconic representations; it is formed by technical and economic determinations as well as aesthetic considerations; it is a medium for the expression of social, cultural and individual affiliations as well as a determining factor for such attributions.

As such, studies of clothing and fashion call for interdisciplinary approaches that combine methods for analysing patterns of consumption, production processes, means of dissemination and questions of representation. Therefore, the contributions in this collection rely on various methodological and theoretical frameworks, borrowed from a variety of disciplines such as sociology, ethnology, art history, visual and media studies as well as more traditional hermeneutic approaches. Fashion is a poly-contextual phenomenon – and has to be studied from various angles. The selection of essays in this issue attempts to give an idea of the vast variety of social and cultural realms fashion partakes in.

Pamela Church Gibson's reassessment of the creation of the infamous Chelsea Dolly Bird of the 1960s, as well as the critical history of dealing with this phenomenon, questions our general relation to fashion, which seems to be torn between chaste rebuff and hedonistic praise. In an analysis of the discourses surrounding, and constructing, the Dolly Bird-phenomenon, Church Gibson reveals the economic and political predicaments overlooked in most critiques and appraisals. Wessie Ling and Frances Ross both analyse the connection between fashion and ethnicity woven into many of our (global) garments. Ling examines the particular meaning that has been attributed to a specific garment, the Chinese cheongsam, by a single Hollywood production, *The World of Suzie Wong*, and other cultural products emanating from this film. Indifferent to its original use in contemporary Hong-Kong, the movie creates the dress as a symbol for the sexy, exotic and servile oriental and female other – a symbol that is, as Ling proves, effective until today. Ross, on the other hand, analyses the influence of tailors coming from African and Caribbean backgrounds on British fashion. Employing three ethnographic studies, Ross gives a detailed account of the ways in which ethnic-minority tailors appropriated and changed the production, marketing and look of Savile Row tailoring. Becky Conekin examines the fascinating contiguities that occur when the apparently superficial and ludic domain of fashion intersects with the supposedly 'hard' world of politics. Looking at Lee Miller's war reports which appeared in *Vogue* in the 1940s, she analyses the ways in which the context of publication determines the content of an article and its style of writing, and interrogates what happens when the space of fashion is filled by news from the war. Thus, the article is not so much about clothes as about the discursive practices associated with fashion. Bettina Friedl, finally, shows how descriptions of dress can play an important part

in literary writing. The two short stories by Henry James, which are analysed here and deal with transcontinental encounters, manage to characterize both the observer and the observed through the artistic rendering of visual depictions. However, clothes, here, not simply mark affiliations to class, gender, ethnicity, etc., but signify individual negotiations of societal expectations.

Fashion, as this first overview shows, is much more than just a succession of clothing styles; rather, it touches a number of issues central to the *Journal for the Study of British Cultures*: social categorization (class, rank), nationality, ethnicity, gender, regional identities, consumption and media. The editors of this issue hope, therefore, that the reader will not only learn to see fashion from a new angle, but that the analysis of fashion-related subjects might also shed some new light on our understanding of British culture in general. Finally, by bringing fashion to the centre of attention, some important new areas of study come to the fore: the significance of the visual in modern society, the value of sensation in the process of sense-making, and the economic restraints of meaning-production.

## II.

Quite obviously, this collection is not the first to take fashion seriously. Fashion (*Mode, la mode*) has often been declared *the* sign of modernity, emblematic of modern man's greed for the new. One important tradition – including Charles Baudelaire, Stéphane Mallarmé and Walter Benjamin – has linked the ephemeral, self-contained, telos-free vanguard nature of fashion to the equally ephemeral, self-contained and telos-free vanguard world of modern art. A second tradition, equally important but often less benevolent towards its subject, has linked the self-determined, apparently unforeseeable and uncontrollable nature of the fashion-system to the equally uncontrollable and self-determined nature of modern economy. In the tradition of Werner Sombart and Paul Nyström, fashion epitomises an economy that transcends the supply of needs and creates new needs; for Thorstein Veblen, Georg Simmel, Herbert Blumer and finally Pierre Bourdieu, fashion becomes *the* model of conspicuous consumption, i.e. a consumption that foremost tries to represent the buyers', and consequently the wearers', socio-economic status, a consumption that is directed towards other people rather than the good in question.

Today, the study of fashion is firmly established as an academic discipline; it has produced a theoretically informed cultural history of fashion (Breward 1995), a detailed introduction to the field of fashion studies (Lillethun & Welters 2007), readers of classical approaches (Bovenschen 1986; Purdy 2004), a meticulous review of its own history (Entwistle 2000), and finally a specialised magazine for theoretical concerns (*Fashion Theory* 1997ff) to accompany the more historical oriented *Costume* (1967ff) and *Textile History* (1968ff). For an account of the state of the discipline, see Palmer (1997) and Tseëlon (2001). Most of the theoretically advanced studies concentrate on late modern and post-modern phenomena

(amongst others: Barthes 1967; Wilson 1985; Finkelstein 1991; Davis 1992; Vinken 1992; Craik 1994; Kondo 1997; Crane 2000; Lehmann 2000; Breward & Evans 2005). On the other hand, the material form, style, production, retailing and consumption of fashion in earlier times have also been well documented (amongst others: Brooke & Laver 2000; Thirsk 1973; Weatherill 1988; Buck 1979; McKendrick, Brewer & Plumb 1982; Lemire 1990 & 1997; Brewer & Porter 1993; McCracken 1988; Waugh 1964 & 1968; Squire 1974; Laver 1995; Berg & Clifford 1999; Ribeiro 2002 & 2005).

Such (belated) academic scrutiny gives evidence to the rise of cultural studies in literary and art historical departments, but also to a semantic turn in the study of economy and society. Also, it can be seen as evidence of the important role fashionable clothes have played in the economic formation and cultural imagination of British society from the Elizabethan court to the Swinging Sixties. While of some importance in Renaissance times already, fashion became a matter of concern for almost everyone, no matter whether s/he was considered noble or not, rich or poor, male or female, young or old, by the end of the seventeenth century.<sup>1</sup> Fashion became a central part of popular culture, concerning and negotiating the individual's place in society. However, compared to the economic and mass-media presence fashion occupies in modern society, academic interest is still comparably neglectful.

### III.

As the texts in this issue deal solely with high- and post-modern phenomena, the following part of the introduction attempts to shed some light on the social history of fashion, especially on the emergence of modern fashion as such. The medieval and early modern sumptuary laws, which regulated the wearing of clothes up to the reign of King James (and much longer in the rest of Europe), had ascribed – or rather: had attempted to do so – a strict meaning to every piece of garment by restricting its use to certain places, times, situations and individuals (cf. Harte 1976). These laws tried to make sure that an individual's given position in society is discernible to the onlooker: "The ideal scenario – from the point of view of the regulators – was one in which a person's social station, social role, gender and other indicators of identity in the world could be *read*, without ambiguity or uncertainty." (Garber 1992: 26) However, the fear that it could be otherwise was already detectable in Renaissance England. While the laws claimed to regulate the presentation of someone's given, pre-social identity, the taboo on cross-dressing, for example, might also be understood as revealing "the fear that representations can actually alter the things they are merely supposed to represent" (Levine 1994: 5). And this idea of performativity, albeit given a more positive twist, seems to lie at the heart of what has been defined as the central feature of the Elizabethan period: 'self-fashioning'. It was Marjorie Garber who first asked whether this was to be taken literally: "Was 'self-fashioning' – the 'forming of a self' – that achievement so

constantly claimed as one of the chief distinguishing features of the Renaissance, in fact at the mercy of fashion? Of clothing?" (1992: 32)

The restrictions imposed on the wearing of clothes, and with it the 'meaning' of these, became the subject of endless debates in religious, moral and economic pamphlets, essays, books, etc. (cf. Wolter 2002; Ribeiro 1986). However, in these discourses on who is to wear what, where, and when, the meaning of these garments was not only disseminated, but first of all constructed. In criticising the wearing of apparently improper clothes, these texts created a complex semantics of clothes. Such semantics had to be developed, because clothes (and their wearers) became increasingly mobile and were leaving their original contexts. A smith's traditional apparel, regulated by his guild, cannot really be considered a sign in the modern sense: it is neither arbitrarily connected to the smith's profession nor can it be repeated beyond its original occurrence – in 1400 a smith's apparel worn by a farmer did not *mean* anything, it was just nonsense. Modern, meaningful clothes, in contrast to traditional costumes, are deliberately chosen. At least one assumes that another has deliberately (or at least unconsciously) chosen to wear his/her clothes, and not others that would have been equally available to him/her. Only when we acknowledge this selection process can clothes be said to be 'readable' in a meaningful sense.

After the Commonwealth and the Glorious Revolution the 'Old Sartorial Regime' (Kuchta 2002) finally came to an end. The factors that restricted or even opposed the possibilities of 'self-fashioning' – birth, blood, a strong authority, restrictions in trade and a general preference for sameness rather than change and novelty – were on the decline. Even more importantly, the means for successful 'self-fashioning', i.e. the means to acquire fashionable clothes, became available to those who were most interested in such status-raising activity: the middle classes. Not only did an expanding economy give an ever increasing number of people the financial means to buy clothes (consumption), and not only did an expanding cloth trade make the purchase of clothes much easier and cheaper (production); even those who were not in the position to buy new garments became able to purchase them second-hand. The expanding interest in new fashions led to a positive circularity: the increasing financial means were to a large degree spent on clothing and other personal attire, and this increase in consumption furthered the possibilities of earning money with the manufacturing of and dealing with clothes, which in turn increased the means to buy clothes for some and lowered the prices for others. Finally, many people came to spend large proportions of their disposable income on clothes.

But *why*? The rising demand for fashionable clothes marks a decisive shift in the organisation of society. The stable connection between appearance and identity, which the sumptuary laws assume, may still be adequate in a traditional rural society, where one either knows one another or not, and accordingly knows her or his position in society. In the modern city, as James Boswell has adequately observed, all of this changes:

In town we see each other only during fragments of our existence, and may more easily assume what character we please. But in the country we have whole days together; and each day is a life, as Shakespeare said in *Macbeth*; so it is exceedingly difficult to disguise our real tempers and characters. (1951: 206)

In traditional societies – if one wants to uphold the dualistic opposition between *modern* and *traditional*, if only for the sake of heuristic clarity –

individuality was constituted neither historically nor by experience: it was no result, but a prerequisite. It was always already existent in a given hierarchical order. It depended on names, on families, on birthplaces, which secured a localisation in society and the world alike. (Esposito 2003: 143; my translation)

If such a stable connection between a given individual identity and its representation ever existed, it surely is disrupted in modern urban society, where one regularly has to deal with people one has never met before (cf. Sennett 1976: 64–72; Wilson 1985: 143–155).

While a traditional society could afford to exclude strangers from its dealings, the modern market society is necessarily a constant meeting of strangers. Bernard Mandeville, the meticulous and ruthless chronicler of early modernity, described the effect of the city on questions of appearance: “Men may hourly meet with fifty strangers to one Acquaintance, and consequently have the Pleasure of being esteem’d by a vast Majority, not as what they are, but what they appear to be” (Mandeville 1732: 127). This appearance, he concludes, is fashioned by people’s clothes: “People, where they are not known, are generally honour’d according to their Clothes and other Accoutrements they have about them” (*ibid.*). Consequently, if the modern transactions of business with fiduciary money – another form of modern communication – rely on the faith in the agent’s trustworthiness, then *homo oeconomicus* wants to appear at its best: “It is this which encourages every Body [...] to wear clothes above his Rank.” (*ibid.*: 128) But if business relies on appearance, everybody – even those who do not try to pretend to be better but only want to affirm their status – has to think about her/his dress, whether s/he likes it or not. Everyone, whether passively following the ruling fashion or actively advancing or even opposing it, now lives under the aegis of fashion – at least if s/he enters the public domain.

Consequently, the study of fashion is not only concerned with the merely (and sometimes extravagantly) fashionable, the *haute couture*, but with the consumption, wearing, observing and representation of all kinds of clothing – fashionability being just one of many affiliations one might (want to) communicate. The consumption of material goods, and especially fashion, becomes an important way of participating in society and expressing this participation. However, this also means that access to fashionable goods – the monetary resources to buy them, but also the cultural knowledge to distinguish *in* from *out* – becomes an increasingly important determining factor for such participation.

#### IV.

Fashion, finally, is a genuinely social and thereby communicative phenomenon. While a hermit might cover himself to keep warm or protect against the sun, every further use of clothes – that is to display (or hide, or fake) one's affiliation to a certain class, gender, sexuality, age, nationality, ethnicity, religious orientation, etc. – does not make any sense without the presence of others. That tights 'are' female, that trainers signal youthfulness, that the three-piece suit talks business, and flip-flops say leisure, nothing of this is innate to any of these products, but the result of a complex evolution of meaning. Fashion's constant change is the obvious indicator that these meanings are subject to continuous transformations: the image of jeans, for example, changed from working-class, to rebel, to youthfulness, to conservatism, etc. (cf. Davis 1992: 68–77). That the same clothes can communicate such diverse meanings is not least the result of a discourse *on* clothes. In magazines, in books, on the stage, etc., the vestmental code is constantly discussed, confirmed, disseminated, changed and renewed. The wearing of clothes can be part of communication, but its code is (at least partly) created by a discourse on textiles. It is this creation of meaning through discourse (Ling), and the communicative use of clothing (Friedl), but also the material determinations of semantics (Ross) as well as the wider repercussions of fashion discourse (Conekin, Church Gibson) that the articles in this issue examine.

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#### Notes

- 1 For the importance of fashion in late-medieval and Renaissance England, especially in questions of status and gender representation, see Breward 1995: 7–74, and Richardson 2004. Wolter (2002) has given a meticulous overview of the discourse on clothes and fashion before 1620, which was predominantly satirical and critical. Despite these accounts, Braudel (1981) and other historians of everyday life have convincingly argued that only with the beginning of the eighteenth century fashion became a widespread social phenomenon; cf. McKendrick's groundbreaking analysis of 'The Commercialization of Fashion' (McKendrick, Brewer & Plumb 1982: 34–99). For the rising concern for fashion during the seventeenth century, see Lemire 1991: 5–12.

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