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Subject Area - Fashion

History of Fashion

Fashion has always been a reflection of the collective consciousness and unconsciousness of society. In politically conservative times, fashion reflects the staidness of the majority, but also the subversive elements of the minority. No less a controversial figure than King Louis XIV of France was rumored to have said that fashion was a mirror. Music, films, and television, all potent pop culture mirrors in their own right of the anxieties, hopes, and dreams of any society, all collectively form a synergistic relationship with fashion, each informing, influencing, and cross-pollinating the others in various turns. Fashion is also a pop culture manifestation of the intellectual and cultural trend of postmodernism. Fashion depends on newness; summer, fall, winter, spring are seasons that occur inexorably each year, and with them, the demand for new fashion lines. The inexhaustible hunger for new ideas and inspirations in fashion and other pop culture arenas leads inevitably to cannibalization, plagiarism, re-contextualization, and re-imagination of ideas past and present – the essence of postmodernism. If we survey the landscape of where pop culture and fashion have been, we can to some degree predict the elements which may define where it will go, though in the postmodern universe of the 21st century, it is next to impossible to predict what incarnations will come to pass.

Fashion is the byproduct of a leisure society that has transcended many of the basic human struggles on the lower level of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Most people in prosperous Western nations are fortunate enough to lead lives in which the acquisition and/or maintenance of food, shelter, and clothing is not a struggle that consumes their existence, as is sadly true in many African nations, for example. Free to ponder the meaning of their lives and the many ways in which it is possible for humans to express their inner thoughts and feelings, citizens of the leisure society began to use fashion as a mode of self-expression and reflection of any number of zeitgeists of their time. As far back as the 1700s, French women consulted fashion magazines to learn the latest fashion trends. Sketch artists were present in royal courts to make note of the fashion choices made by the ruling classes, and communicated these ideas to dressmakers across the nation, who in turn crafted facsimiles for those who were able to afford such fashion mimicry. The French have historically held a special place in the fashion universe since this time.

As the 1800s and 1900s saw Western societies evolve from agrarian societies to industrial societies, with the concurrent increase in wealth and disposal income, the focus on and indulgence in fashion increased. With the advent of pop music, most notably rock-and-roll in the 1950s, and television, teenagers all around the world saw the likes of Elvis Presley and his gyrating hips, causing a global fashion sensation. Boys everywhere began to sport white t-shirts (in whose sleeves the more raucous ones rolled packs of cigarettes), blue jeans, and grease their hair. Celebrities from the arenas of music, film, and then television became the new royalty, the new elites, for Western cultures, and the fashion trends they embodied became inspirations for millions in each successive generation.

The messages of rock-and-roll became more complex, subversive, and powerful in the 1960s, corresponding with the United States' controversial entry into the Vietnam War and a wholesale rejection on both sides of the Atlantic of many of the traditional values of the Cold War era. The Beatles's turn from fresh-scrubbed, feel-good bubblegum pop to psychedelic and metaphysical subject matter influences a new set of fashion trends which shocked the Establishment to the core. Men and women everywhere began wearing colorful (both literally and figuratively), outrageously expressive, and even outlandish fashions, and allowing their hair to grow long.

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The exhaustion from the myriad political and socio-cultural revolutions of the 1960s, and the stagnant Western economies of the 1970s gave way to a culture preoccupied with escapism and simply having a good time. Sit-ins and political protests gave way to champagne-filled boogie nights. The flower-power psychedelia fashion trends of the late 1960s and early 1970s gave way to the groovy leisure suit styles inspired by the music trend of disco that consumed the world from roughly 1976 to 1980 and cemented by the global box office phenomenology of the film Saturday Night Fever, starring John Travolta and featuring a soundtrack packed with disco hits written by the Bee Gees. The tight-fitting and well-cut suits worn by Travolta, and the sexy, stylish dresses and pantsuits of the women in the film inspired millions to change their wardrobes accordingly. On the tail end of the disco era came a brief but potent preoccupation with cowboy fashion, inspired by the peculiar utilitarian clothing from the American Old West – cowboy boots, rugged blue jeans, ten-gallon cowboy hats, etc., again propelled into the collective fashion consciousness of the world by another hugely successful film, 1982's Urban Cowboy.

At the same time the fashion trends inspired by disco and cowboy culture were dying out, the realm of the political again profoundly affected the universe of fashion. The elections of conservative political figureheads Margaret Thatcher in England and Ronald Reagan in the U.S. sparked a schizophrenic revolution in clothing and music: as economic recoveries were engineered on the backs of the working poor, the culture that proclaimed "greed is good" took to reveling in the wearing conservative, yet expensive or even shocking clothing – furs, for example -- which reflected the mindset of conspicuous consumption. Simultaneously, those cultural elements who were not benefiting from the economic boom were rebelling against the conservative establishment trends and adopting controversial styles embodied, for example, in the slut-chic clothing popularized by the music and videos of Madonna. Music videos, a new invention in pop culture and institutionalized by the power of MTV, became a new showcase for outrageous fashion statements in the 1980s and beyond.

The greed and spiritual bankruptcy of the 1980s gave way to the hippie nouveaux culture of the Earth-and-cause-friendly early-to-mid 1990s, and then to the greed nouveaux culture of the late 1990s, spawned by the phenomenal economic growth of the Internet boom. By this time, pop culture had begun to liberally cannibalize itself for new ideas, having exhausted much of its potential for true originality. As technology and civilization continue their exponential evolution of consumption, genuinely original ideas become more and more difficult to generate, leading fashion designers to borrow from past ideas, to combine hitherto uncombined or un-combinable ideas, as evidenced by the infamous phrase "What's old is new; what's new is old."

The early 21st Century is a time of profound uncertainty in fashion, with a myriad of recycled influences competing for the crown of the next hot fashion trend. The inherent self-referentiality and cannibalism of post-modernism, however, makes it virtually impossible to predict which trends will take hold and when. The next decade will make for a fascinating time in the universe of fashion.

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