

Desire and Body: The American Fashion Scene

Zsófia Bán

Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest

Cet article analyse les raisons ayant conduit, au cours de la présente décennie, à un regain d'intérêt envers ce qu'il est convenu d'appeler la « fashion scene ». Le phénomène est en grande partie lié à des tendances présentes dans le contexte social et culturel ; il reflète, consciemment ou non, certains changements de comportements, de valeurs et de modes de vie au sein de la culture américaine. L'hypothèse de base développée ici est que la situation de la mode sur la scène américaine contemporaine exprime de manière extrêmement originale et forte les différents aspects de ce que la théorie culturelle désigne sous le terme de « biopolitique », à savoir les questions liées au genre, au sexe, à la race, à l'âge, etc. L'article s'efforce aussi d'analyser la transition entre modernité et postmodernité telle qu'elle apparaît sous les nouveaux feux du monde de la mode. La mode des années 90 s'est révélée être un puissant médium pour le « langage du corps », après l'irruption de celui-ci dans l'univers artistique sous la forme du « body art ». La mode et les défilés de mode sont un terrain favorable aux jeux de rôle, à la construction de la personne ou de personnages, à toutes sortes d'appropriations, bref à une évolution qui risque d'en faire la très expressive Gesamtkunst de notre actuelle fin de siècle.

“Scarlett ‘n the Hood,” ran the title of the fashion layout in the May 1996 edition of *Vanity Fair* which featured the magazine’s black fashion editor André Leon Talley’s and the designer and photographer Karl Lagerfeld’s joint tongue-in-cheek treatment of one of the most popular but also one of the most racially loaded movies of all time, *Gone with the Wind*. Talley, the longtime sole black fashion editor, cast Naomi Campbell, herself one of the few black supermodels, as Scarlett; Charlton Cannon, a young black model appeared as Rhett; the bearded and robustly white designer Gianfranco Ferré as Mammy, and a few other well-known (white) designers as other servants at Tara.¹ Hilarious as they are, Lagerfeld’s photographs, besides being a source of pleasure and amusement, offer obvious critical commentary on the dominant discourse (or, to be *postmodernly* correct, at least *one* of the dominant discourses, in this case affected by the discourse of racism) of American fashion which invariably populates the runways with an exaggerated number of white models, a fact that has provoked some critical insiders to label such fashion shows as the “blond” or even “Aryan” collections.

One could cite numerous other recent examples in which fashion layouts or shows have expressly addressed issues of race, gender, age, size and class in order to subvert or at least question the dominant discourses used to

comment on such issues, not just in the field of fashion but in the whole of contemporary American culture. As the nineties unfold, it is becoming impossible to ignore that shows, say, presenting clothes for women size 14 and over—more than a third of women in America—paraded by aging supermodels of past decades, have a conspicuously, and imperatively, wider scope of reference than the mere question of what to buy and wear in any given season. Fashion, more than in any other previous period, has become the ubiquitous *supersign* of the times, inundating the mass media and the arts, high culture and popular culture. No matter where you look, you will find yourself mercilessly exposed to the *F-word*, and there is no law, yet, to protect you from it: you will see it on billboards, in magazines, on television, at the movies (a recent, to my mind successful but otherwise widely criticized example is Robert Altman's *Prêt-à-porter*), on the Internet (see home shopping), in politics (see e.g. the obsession with what the First Lady wears and with its implications), at the ballet (as with dance companies like Martha Graham's or the Joffrey Ballet using designers' clothes), at the theater, in postmodern art and literature (for example in Bret Easton Ellis' infamous novel *American Psycho*), in academic curricula and, most recently, even at the Oscars where the costumes designed for the films were presented in the form of a fashion show. One could go on endlessly. The presence of the phenomenon is obvious; the question is *why?* Why have clothes and the institution of fashion become, as it were, the *embodiment* of the spirit of the times, the embodiment of *Zeitgeist* in the nineties? The choice of the term 'embodiment' is by no means accidental in this context, as the answer seems to lie somewhere around the word ensconced in it: *body*.

Some people, like Adam Gopnik in *The New Yorker's* 1994 special issue on "The World of Fashion," find it "weird" that "people seem to want to believe that fashion has a message just at the moment when it no longer tries hard to make a point." Although fashion, being no longer prescriptive and forbidding, may not carry imperatives the way it used to, one cannot ignore the fact that this plurality and eclecticism can, and actually *has*, become the "message" itself. In postmodernity, an era repeatedly labeled as decentered and largely characterized by the decline of the "grand narrative," by the flourishing of new, mini-discourses (*petit récits*), by the mixture of high and low and by the phenomenon of appropriation, among others, fashion has become the "commodity *par excellence*," reflecting and—dare I resuscitate such an *unpostmodern* notion—satisfying the basic needs, desires and drives of postmodern culture. "What the art world was to the eighties, the fashion scene is becoming to the nineties," wrote art critic Ingrid Sischy², referring mainly to a whole new strategy of appropriation which, literally, *de-constructs*, demolishes to an even greater extent the wall originally raised between elite and mass culture, thus further destabilizing the existence and the legitimacy of a separate art world. And the more discourse in the eighties began to revolve

around the domination of the body, the more such a destabilization seemed to be the order of the day.

Modernity has been branded as notoriously not having fulfilled its promises, and figuring most prominently among these unfulfilled promises is the promise concerning the liberation of the body.³ The Christian duality of body and soul was to have been done away with in order to facilitate the birth of "modern liberty." The Hegelian vision of body and soul eventually reaching a state of perfect harmony in the end of History ruled triumphantly. Nevertheless, practically all the new achievements of modernity tended to undermine the values of the body and the bodily, repressing, controlling and preferably replacing it to an extent unprecedented in earlier times. The impersonalization of modern industry, warfare and the system of representation was hailed as one of the greatest values of modernity. Traces of man's physical, bodily existence were considered undesirable, and traditional politics looked upon man's liberation from biological factors as a sure sign of progress in modernity. However, the classical, great paradox of modernity, as it has repeatedly been pointed out, is that modernity, while attempting to repress, oppress and eliminate the body, also introduced the law of *habeas corpus* which guarantees the legal protection and thus the political liberation of that same body. The development of biopolitics as an alternative to traditional politics is thus a logical consequence of the unresolved tensions generated by the contradictory tendencies governing modern culture and society. Instead of the promised harmonic collapsing or unification of soul and body, we have only witnessed the *growth* of the by now seemingly unbridgeable gap, especially after the notion of 'the soul' having undergone that strange, indeed at times terrifying metamorphosis which, through various stages of transformation, eventually collapsed it with the *rational*. Hence Foucault's proverbial dictum pronouncing the soul to be "the prison of the body."

Biopolitics (as opposed to traditional politics) asserts the radical *physical difference* and consequent autonomy of the body in opposition to the abstract universalism posited by Reason. This antiuniversalist strain fits biopolitics smoothly into the general agenda of postmodernity, even though the newly created minidiscourses and epistemologies all eventually evolve into a grand narrative of their own (e.g. *herstory* as opposed to history). As the problems of the body are by nature articulated in everyday life, biopolitics has led to a gross politicizing of the private sphere, thus uniquely, and at times dangerously, collapsing the private and the public. Obvious examples of the dangers implied are the extreme instances of 'political correctness' whose often forbidding and totalitarian forms (presenting themselves with striking impact first and foremost in contemporary American culture⁴) are especially frightening and repelling for those of us coming from countries only recently liberated from totalitarian political regimes in which political correctness was

the only possible *modus vivendi* for the vast majority who chose not to be active members of the opposition. (Americans, not having had the “benefit” of such experience, often have a hard time understanding the derisive and strongly critical attitude towards *p.c.* often coming from citizens of such countries.⁵)

In the arts the issue primarily at stake—especially since the beginning of the modern age—is the representability of the individual, the self, or the Ego. Modernism is generally known for its stressing individuality and uniqueness, and for its magnifying the question of originality and aura to mythic dimensions, which program turned out to be no longer valid by the time the term postmodernism was coined. In an age dominated by the media, by the world of *simulacra* and simultaneity the construction of identity turned—via biopolitics—to the manipulation of the body, to role playing, to the constant production of new personae, new images and, alternatively, to the reproduction of stereotypes. Biopolitics ruled that only through the manipulation of the body could identity be represented which, admittedly, led to the fetishization of the body, but at the same time invalidated the previously assumed fatality of biology. Fate was no longer determined by biology but became a matter of choice. Hence body-building, body piercing, transsexuality and all that jazz was in, while preconceived labels were out. The “human zoo” in which all the specimens are locked up in individual cages with informative—and definitive—name tags on them became hopelessly *passé* (along with the term *zoo* itself, by the way, which according to the requirements of *p.c.* is now supposed to be called *wildlife preservation park*, the original term being deemed too degrading for resident animals.)

Modernist art strived to liberate the individual’s expression of the self from the constraints of realism by resorting to abstraction and surrealism, a program subsequently subverted by pop art’s cultural critique which no longer focused on the representation of the self but much rather on the logic of cultural production and consumption, and the fashions developed therein. Its methods lay largely in the application of stylizing, irony and repetition, along with the continuous adoption of new images for a Protean persona (see e.g. Andy Warhol or David Bowie). As a reaction to the questions raised by biopolitics, pop art gradually gave way to different forms of body art in the early eighties which, instead of focusing on issues of the production and consumption of cultural artifacts as pop art did, turned instead to articulate a critique of the representation of the self in a society dominated by the media, thus foregrounding the use of stereotypical images constructed and diffused by the media. An obvious example is Cindy Sherman’s *Film Stills* from the late seventies, a series of photographs which reproduced, through the artist’s own body, *our own* stereotypical images of film characters from the fifties. It is, in other words, the representation of how such stereotypical images are stored in our collective memory—the main feature of these pictures being that it is

always the artist herself who is the model impersonating different characters. The problems raised by fashion already figured prominently in such works, and it is indeed impossible to decide which industry, film or fashion, was dominating the other. (Sherman's work has been highly sensitive to this dilemma as she gradually moved on from film stills to the visual critique of fashion photography.) Primary among the problems raised is, once again, the representability of the self, the Ego, and the related problem of the *portrait*: if the artist herself is represented as impersonating a certain kind of character, a stereotype with the help of a mask (i.e. make-up, costumes, lighting, or, as in Sherman's later work, real masks)—whose portrait will it be? That of the artist or someone else's? Will it be that of the character impersonated in the picture, or simply that of the period to which the character represented belongs? Or would it be that of *both* the artist and the character with a reciprocal effect on each other? Does the represented character also have something to say about the artist and her time, or is it only the artist who reflects on the character and *its* time? And, not insignificantly, with whom is the *viewer* supposed to identify: with the artist, the self behind the mask, or with the impersonated character (which, moreover, often does not even have an original—as in the case of the *Film Stills*—being only a *simulated* figure which, even though we all *recognize* it from somewhere, we can never assign to one specific work)? All these questions have made art and the media turn inevitably to the world of fashion, a field uniquely subsuming all of the above.

Fashion has always been a medium through which the potential for change latently present in a culture could be activated and articulated. Fashion allows for spectacular and highly influential statements made by marginal groups, hence presenting itself as a possible source of destabilization in the eyes of those wishing to sustain the given social order. As Baudrillard has pointed out,⁶ from the point of view of power, fashion is hell itself because it does not respect established values and judgment criteria. In other words, says Baudrillard, fashion is *immoral*, it relativizes all signs, whereupon the dominant order has to crush fashion in order to assert its own signs. Fashion is a *play-ground* of desires where all kinds of latent desires can be acted out without any major risks involved. It "plays" with the perennial question of "who am I?" by way of multiplying the self—without, as Roland Barthes has remarked,⁷ having to fear the loss of the self.⁸ Fashion is the altar consecrated to the religion of, indeed the obsession with artificiality. Postmodernity, in its turn, is itself an era imbued with artificiality, an era in which the trace of labor, thus the human link is lost in its commodities as opposed to modernity where that link was still present.⁹ Objects become mere signs which assume their meaning only from "their differential relation to other signs."¹⁰ Hence fashion offers a unique site not only for examining the move from modernity to postmodernity, but also for the staging of the main concerns and drives of the postmodern era. There is, undoubtedly, something spectacularly magical in it all, as if we were

suddenly confronted with ancient cave paintings come to life, and surrounded by the coveted wild animals without, however, having to run the least risk. It is probably this hidden magic that awes everyone, regardless of the person's interest in fashion per se.¹¹

D. H. Lawrence in his foreword to *Studies in Classic American Literature* writes the following: "Americans refuse everything explicit and always put up a sort of double meaning. They revel in subterfuge. They prefer their truth safely swaddled in an ark of bulrushes, and deposited among the reeds until some friendly Egyptian princess comes to rescue the babe." It is difficult to ignore this statement when one is trying, in the guise of "some friendly Egyptian princess," to interpret the recent foregrounding of fashion—and more specifically, the fashion show—in an American culture which seems to swaddle all kinds of "truths" in clothes.¹² The double entendre of recent fashion shows is that it seemingly fulfills the traditional prescriptive role of such events (in terms of what to wear), whereas in reality it is *descriptive*, articulating the yet unsatisfied social needs and desires of certain marginal or minority groups, like those of blacks (or people of color in general), middle-aged, old or fat people, gays (including the spectacular S&M group and transvestites), punks or even cyborgs.

The role of the *mask* as it was used in body art is here taken over by the *model*—the live body turned mask—which further probes the question of the representability of the self, the individual. The models in these shows are no longer mere vehicles for the clothes, but express a baffling, ambiguous individuality of their own.¹³ The unclearness of the boundary between subject and object, private and public is highly disturbing, and it endows these shows with a vibrating, electric quality which is probably what attracts such a large public.¹⁴ The postmodern fashion show, to borrow Arthur Danto's formulation, "plays with the edge" in a way very similar to Robert Mapplethorpe's work which Danto characterized with these words.¹⁵ Clothes are no longer the object of consumption in these shows; what is being consumed is the aura of the event itself, the magic let loose in the performance of the hidden self. An unforgettable cinematic documentation of such an event can be seen in the movie *Paris is Burning* (1990) which presents the world of black male transvestites in New York having their annual voguing ball. Voguing, a term originating from gay subculture has indelible ties with the world of fashion as it refers to "striking a pose" through the means of gestures, make-up and clothes. The ball is basically a competition where the drag queens enter in various "categories" representing all kinds of characters, but one category reigns supreme, and that is none other than the so-called "realness category" where competitors have to prove how authentically they can fake being a *real man*. Whoever wins this category is queen absolute of the ball. *Nothing*, in my opinion, that can be said about the postmodern fashion scene could possibly

surpass the notion of “realness category” in terms of irony, subtlety, emotion and intellect.¹⁶

Voguing has by now become a term widely used, its familiarity due largely to the efforts of Madonna who not only came out with an international hit called “Vogue” in which she parodies the conventions of fashion and the logic of stardom, but is herself the embodiment of the concept of voguing, of striking different poses. Madonna creatively combines elements of body art, fashion, biopolitics, film imagery (via videoclips) and pop music, indefatigably churning out new images for consumption.¹⁷ She is undoubtedly a grand master (mistress?) of appropriation, even if frequently criticized by gays and African-Americans for transporting elements of their culture into her work and using them totally out of their original context. This may be true, but while doing so, she also inevitably popularizes these subcultures in the media. Be that as it may, Madonna’s performances can be interpreted as musical and dance versions of the postmodern fashion show in which she is the sole strongly sexualized but fluidly gendered supermodel, whose gender is fashion itself.¹⁸

Troubled as mediatized postmodern American culture is with the loss of touch, the loss of close contact with reality (a problem only aggravated by the fear of AIDS), fashion shows provide a forum where the wide range of obstructed or repressed desires may be displayed in public. Not least among these is the desire to satisfy the *gaze* in a culture which, as a result of extremist interpretations of *p.c.*, has practically put a ban on looking in “close encounters of the normal kind” lest one’s gaze prove to be offensive in some way to the Other. (Anyone who has taken a ride on the New York subway standing among crowds of people all staring straight ahead with glazed eyes or fiercely examining their shoelaces can easily imagine what the adoption of this unwritten code can mean when transposed to other areas of life.) The postmodern fashion show is a *feast* not just in the sense of its being a form of carefree expenditure but also in the sense of its being a feast for the eyes, or more specifically a feast for the deprived gaze. It offers, like the theater, real—if masked—bodies for aesthetic consumption, instead of merely simulated ones, without running the risks implied in everyday encounters. It can, however, highlight *the subject of the gaze* to a much greater extent than theater is able to by virtue of fashion’s being perfectly devoid of narrative elements and time and thus “constantly euphoric”, to use Roland Barthes’ formulation.¹⁹ There is no consistent story-line, no fully drawn characters, no chronology, no development, no action in the narrative sense of the word. On the runway all that matters is the pure embodiment and fulfillment of the gaze. Like paintings in Lacanian theory, fashion shows too tell the spectator: “You want to see? Well, take a look at this!”²⁰ And sure enough, they have that same “pacifying, Apollonian effect,” inviting the spectator to “lay down his gaze there as one lays down one’s weapons.”

Notes

1 This kind of “game” is, of course, not without precedents, see e.g. Picasso’s paraphrase of Manet’s *Olympia*, in which Olympia’s place is taken by the black servant girl, while the servants are represented as white male nudes.

2 In above mentioned issue of *The New Yorker*.

3 On this see Ferenc Fehér/Ágnes Heller, *Biopolitics* (Aldershot; Brookfield, Vt.: Avebury, 1994; *Public Policy and Social Welfare* series, vol. 15.) In the next two paragraphs I attempt to summarize those statements of their study which are of primary relevance to my present topic.

4 See for example the recent, highly controversial case of that eight year-old schoolboy who was suspended from his school for having “sexually harassed” a classmate by planting a kiss on the little girl’s cheek. The outrage this decision provoked in both American and international public opinion resulted in the discontinuing of the suspension after a few days.

5 It seems one must, however, repeatedly stress that such critique refers not to the otherwise progressive institution of *p.c.* in general, but only to its extreme and harmful forms, i.e. ideally it should only refer to such instances of *p.c.*

6 In *L’échange symbolique et la mort* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976); chapter “La mode ou la féerie du code.”

7 In *Système de la mode* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1967); chapter 18, 189.

8 Incidentally, the problem of the multiplication of the self is now being gradually transferred to the world of the Internet, and psychologists prophecy the phenomenon known as “multiple personalities” to become the new metaphoric illness of the 21st century, in the same way as tuberculosis was for the 19th and cancer and AIDS is for the 20th century. The Internet offers a unique, and if need be, anonymous opportunity for role-playing with no risks involved. The Jules Verne of our times working in the recently developed genre of cyberpunk have eagerly embraced this topos.

9 On this see Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism and the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991).

10 Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (St. Louis, Mo.: Telos Press Ltd., 1981). While in Jameson’s work mentioned above one can find traces of nostalgia for the projects of modernism, in Baudrillard’s interpretation of the postmodern turn there is mostly a sense of relief and liberation.

11 If it is true that the love affair between Claudia Schiffer and David Copperfield was merely the concoction of clever PR people for media consumption, as many people think it was, in terms of the above statements it was a very *knowing* move to pair off one of the most popular supermodels and the world’s number one magician (who, moreover, also happens to be very photogenic). Thus the marriage of fashion and magic is justified not only in abstract theories, but is a “fact” consumed on a daily basis by large masses of people via the cover stories of magazines.

12 I am, of course, aware of the fact that this phenomenon is not exclusively characteristic of American culture, as with the help of the media it has by now become an international commonplace, but it seems fairly obvious that it is American culture which—as so many times before in the history of pop culture—gets the benefit for having made the initiative.

Having made the above reference to Lawrence, it is here that I would like to add that one could, in retrospect, fruitfully interpret classic American literary texts, like for instance Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* or *Young Goodman Brown* in terms of the semiotics of the fashion show, Hawthorne being an exceptionally good example for the Americans' preference for "double meanings." Tempting as this topic may be, I will have to save it for some other time.

13 Many artists who previously had and wanted nothing to do with the world of fashion have recently embraced the subject in order to express their thoughts on the issue of the body. The photographer Nan Goldin, for instance, who has been one of the *enfants terribles* of the American avant-garde movement since the seventies and who is known for her infamous, hard core realism photos taken of her closest friends, members of New York's alternative art world, has now taken up a certain variety of fashion photography creating pictures which, on a certain level, do indeed work as fashion layouts, but which can also be interpreted as extremely intimate, personal portraits of the models. According to Goldin, the biggest challenge is to represent the "sadness" of the models in an authentic and disturbing manner. This is the kind of work which can be called *fashion art*. (Nan Goldin's retrospective exhibition entitled "I'll Be Your Mirror" opened in October 1996 at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.)

14 This pulsating, ambiguous quality is nicely revealed in the fact that the term *model* as it is used in English collapses the subject and the object. It refers simultaneously to the person demonstrating the outfit and the outfit itself, whereas the term *mannequin* as it is used in French—and, incidentally, also in Hungarian—refers only to the subject, but a *lifeless* one at that.

15 Arthur C. Danto, *Playing With the Edge: The Photographic Achievement of Robert Mapplethorpe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

16 At the same time, this is the event which in our postmodern world puts Bakhtin's thoughts on the institution of carnival in a whole new perspective. The topic is highly relevant nowadays when instead of permanent revolution we seem to be living in a period of permanent carnival which, by turn, also carries a certain amount of revolutionary content—for a while, at least— by allowing us to choose our body, our gender and sexual identity like we choose fashionable clothes which can be discarded at will and replaced by others. This, however, might not be enough for redemption. Thus the body ceases to be the untouchable, sacred temple of bygone days and becomes a tempting shopping mall.

17 She—literally—just gave birth to the most recent one in the form of a little girl, thus adding to her images that of the mother. As I write this, the media is prepared to pay \$350,000 to the photographer who is able to present the first shot of "Madonna With Child."

18 On this see Baudrillard, *L'échange symbolique et la mort*; "La mode ou la féerie du code."

19 In *Système de la mode* Barthes refers thus to fashion in general.

20 Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (first Am. ed.: New York: Norton, 1978).

