

# **Art and Fashion in the 20th Century: Is fashion just another commodity?**

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This essay will present a main focus on fashion in the 1980s, with research and discussions on whether or not fashion during this decade was another commodity. This essay will begin with brief explanations of aspects in fashion during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A description of two fashion divisions will also be noted to reveal ideas about designs for mass production and custom-based fashion. Furthermore, deliberations on the 1980s memorable and quite distinctive fashion will be analysed, bringing into account the fashion designers and styles of the decade, along with commodities and consumerism.

Paris, known as the birth place for fashion, divided the creative industry of fashion into two distinct categories in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century; one division was the ‘world of couture’, which was in reality a closed style to the masses, designed only for the elite on a custom-made basis (Baudot, 1999; 11). For the average person this fashion style and class was an unattainable luxury. The other division was commonly referred as ‘off-the-peg clothes’, specifically designed for mass production and purchase (Baudot, 1999; 11). Fashion has always provided a relatively unlimited range of ways for expressing ones self in society through self-determination of the body’s image; and people in certain social groups often represent their exclusive arena for self-expression (Radford, 1998; 156). The body itself can be seen as a consuming commodity, thus in a competitive world, ‘ordinary’ appearances are not always encouraged. Advertising often prompts us to display bodily perfection with the available fashions, with the endeavour to allot ourselves satisfactory value, significance or prestige in society (Watson, 1998; 56).

Through the years fashion has influenced the majority of designs today; continuing to exceed in public relations, exposure and mass marketing, simply by its appearance, particularly with women’s apparel. Fashion is an extremely visual or ‘image-based industry’ promoted by the appearance for success (Barthes, 1983) (Condra, 2008; 216).

However, publicity and mass marketing of designer clothing has somewhat consumed the world of haute couture, often shortening the timelines of fashions and prompting creations of 'fast fashion' or cheaper designs (Condra, 2008; 216). Some styles in the 1980s and current fashion are in reality designed for the purpose of being sold in large quantities, thus making them mass commodities. On the other hand, the continuous reproduction of clothing still exhibits what the fashion houses, catwalks and parades continually reveal as 'in vogue'.

Postmodernism and the multitude of styles were widespread in the 1980s, marking an era of success and achievement, with diverse styles ranging from hip-hop, elite apparel, pirate-style, power-dressing and casual looks of sportswear that added fresh designs and splashes of colour to society (Lehnert, 2000; 84). The 1980s was also characterised as the period of 'consumerist excess', rendering an economic and industrial boom where wealth was flaunted through the purchase of expensive commodities, especially designer label fashions (Jones, 2011). Popular brand-names during the 1980s such as Zara, H&M and the UK Top Shop were generally designed for the elite, rich and famous associations or celebrities. Recognized icons and models promoted such status in society, by displaying clothes of high standard that were often short lived because of quality prestige, practicality and high pricing (Wilson, 2003). Production and retail of fashion around the globe has been analysed through the term of 'trickle-down', which portrays the model of fashion trends, from the 'elite' to the 'majority'; replacing the origins of fashion into diversity, and polycentric areas (Braham, 1997; 145).

Richard Martin (Lehnert, 2000; 84) asserted that past fashions were not made immortal, but were revived in the 1980s. Gertrude Lehnert (2000; 84-85) also highlights that the attention to past fashion was often influenced by the opulent costumes of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Movies like *Amadeus* and *Dangerous Liaisons*, based on 18<sup>th</sup> century conduct, inspired designers such as John Galliano and Jean-Paul Gaultier. Gaultier however, was also motivated by the puff-sleeves and tight vests from the 16<sup>th</sup> century (Watson, 2003). "The very coexistence of markedly different styles was an essential part of the 1980s fashion, which abandoned the idea...that there had to be a definite style, a definitive trend. A wide

variation in styles asserted itself, and artistic originality consisted of the relevant use of references, through which individuality was not clearly defined but was instead couched in various historical foils” (Lehnert, 2000; 85). The 1980s indeed marked a time that brought in revised trends from historic fashion.

Designers around the world started to gain recognition and French designers were no longer the most dominate organisations during the 1980s. Fashion of the 1980s became international, increasingly playful and post-modern, with approaches to historical fashions but in a completely new quality. “A kind of hybrid historicism emerged during the decade: there was no new Empire style, no neomedieval fashion as such. Rather, suitable matches were sought out from everywhere, were put together anew and shaped into something highly modern” (Lehnert, 2000; 84). This development in fashion led to a variety of styles running parallel to those in the visual arts. Women began to feel that they could at last, choose from many available alternative and contrasting looks. A significant creed in the 1980s was particularly aimed at women, to display their bodies as the ideal self. They could model themselves with any outfit to achieve a desired identity, with emphasis on dieting, training and physical workouts. “The ideal of female beauty of the 1980s was no longer...a ladylike beauty of the 1950s, but a sporty, slim, muscular, and ambiguous woman who was successful at work and in her private life and dressed accordingly, not denying her glamour and her eroticism but deliberately using them” (Lehnert, 2000; 85-86).

The most famous and powerful fashion guise of the 1980s was emphasis on the waist and broadening of the shoulders. The waist, hip and legs were made to look slim with pants or, more often, tight knee-length skirts; and accentuating the shoulders with bulky padding in jackets (Buxbaum, 1999; 122–125), featuring a well-tailored look (Weston-Thomas, 2001-11). This style was initially designed for women in business careers, where it obtained the terminology of ‘power dressing’. Before long, shoulder pads were inserted into casual-wear, blouses and exclusive evening dresses, as women discovered the satisfying outcomes with body proportions.

Lehnert (2000; 87) states that the careers of women were often made easier by the implementation of suitable clothing; "...they appropriated certain forms of men's clothes and therefore made the sexual side of women invisible, instead stressing their equal competence," hence the expression of 'power dressing' or 'dressing for success' (Baudot, 1999). Giorgio Armani was one fashion designer whose essential design concept was to imbue practical principles into the garments without ever falling into the form of ostentation. These well-tailored suits were known as the Armani style, adding a class of identity in the corporate world and giving the impression of authority or power to the female silhouette; while still asserting femininity (Baudot, 1999).

Yuppie fashion in particular was another dominant trend throughout the 1980s, representing the 'Young Urban Professionals'. The stereotype 'yuppie' was seen as a young motivated career person who worked long hours and spent their income carelessly, often over-spending; just to show others their prestige and ease to attain fashionable commodities (Weston-Thomas, 2011). The typical 1980s female yuppie would wear a power-suit with large shoulder pads, a straight knee-length skirt, heavy looking jewelry and an expensive brand-name bag. Men would wear basic business suits, much like today's style, with striped or plain shirts and black suspenders, carrying a large briefcase, a brick-sized phone and slicked back hair for the 'professional' business look (Vintage Threads, 2011). There were many ways to influence society with fashion; television series such as *Dynasty* and *Dallas* having an immense sway on society, with over 250 million watching the show around the world (Weston-Thomas, 2001-11), thus creating successful advertisements for fashion of that era.

Fashion models were predominantly a major success in the 1980s; becoming more distinguished than celebrated actresses. As a result catwalk shows, arranged by dominant fashion houses, were transformed into more enhanced performances, events and prestigious affairs, with frequent broadcastings; taking a higher priority in social agendas (Baudot, 1999; 278). During the time that fashion models and shows became more popular, fashion designers soon started to reassemble into smaller groups with the

intention of displaying their own distinguished features. Before long, designers such as Rei Kawakubo and Yohji Yamamoto, from Japan, embarked upon a mission to challenge aesthetic standards of body proportions and the norm of beauty. Their work underlined the discovery of an unsubstantiated moment and revealed the processes of tailoring in clothes. The way the garment was constructed, and how it took shape, became more important than the colour of the item (Gill 1998, 26). This style was later dubbed as Deconstructionism by the end of 1989 (Buxbaum, 1999).

Kawakubo and Yamamoto created some of the utmost innovations in fashion, presenting imaginative and provocative styles that were in total contrast to the figure-fitted clothes during the 1980s. “These designers created oversize, asymmetrical unstructured layers that disguised the body” (Jones, 2011). Slashes and tears were purposely added, along with raw edges, faded and distressed fabric, and authenticating black as the most popular tone. “From the outset Kawakubo’s clothes challenged many of the principles of western fashion including traditional notions of fabric, cut, silhouette and image. Reaction from the fashion media was initially mocking with some describing it as the ‘Japanese bag lady look’ however [the] aesthetic [values] proved to be influential and popular” (Jones, 2011). This remarkable and phenomenal Japanese style brought in details of past fashion, as ancient European sites were examined by these revolutionary designers. There was an undeniable poetry in this diverse fashion: “Flat shoes, no make-up, modesty, reserve and secrecy – theirs was a resolutely modern look [that has become legendary]” (Baudot, 1999; 313).

Vivienne Westwood, one of England’s most extraordinary and well-known fashion designers, began to put aside her earlier designs and brought together a more radical cut of clothing in the 1980s, having similar concepts to Kawakubo and Yamamoto (Lehnert, 2000; 120). Westwood became depressed at the decline in elegance, and the arrival of American sportswear, tracksuits and trainers, declaring that these styles were ‘brain-damaged’ looks in Britain’s youth. Consequently Westwood became a designer that reinvented, exploited and refused to compromise, thus often creating outrageous, yet still beautiful clothes that are relentlessly copied, but in a more diluted form (Lehnert, 2000;

382-384). Westwood's styles and concepts certainly give evidence of a typical post-modern fashion. Throughout the 1980s, fashion was later regarded as "The time that fashion forgot", with most common laws of fashion broken or torn into pieces (Vintage Threads, 2011). Many designers like Westwood decided that fashion had to be about ideas, expression, passion, wit and fun but still embracing global concerns, their inspiration with culture was very eclectic (Franklin, 2010; 173).

Some major and trendy styles of the 1980s included African-style teased and permed hair, un-plucked eyebrows and heavy make-up. Volumised hairstyles exclusively promoted the 1980s fashion with hair mousse, gels and sprays used in excess to create many desired looks. Television companies like MTV in the United States and other world television shows, were major influences in society for 1980s fashion. These influences often manipulated people, urging them to push the boundaries and express themselves through bold coloured clothing, large accessories, radical patterns and excessive makeup. Poodle perms, tight leggings, jelly shoes and acid wash jeans were common trends of the 1980s, but were later classified as the 'Crimes of Fashion', and although they were once popular in the streets and fashion events, they have become trendy again in much of today's fashion. With the vast selection of fashion available, nations started to gain the miscellaneous feature. It was a period of rebellion and independence, which has reminisced and influenced a range of fashions today (Vintage Threads, 2011).

Hazel Clark (2007; 3) claims that fashion has, in many ways, referenced other non-western cultures for centuries and continues to establish designs and identities based on indigenous lines. "Some have used familiar cultural signifiers based on cultural stereotypes...[for example] golden dragons on red grounds [denote] Chinese culture... while others have looked to cultural practices...values and cultural memory". Moreover, Clark (2007) states that during the 1980s, Western-based global fashion systems looked to 'street culture', and the trend of hip-hop soon took place, with Tommy Hilfiger bringing the varied styles to global consumers.

Primarily created in the 1980s, hip-hop icons like Run-DMC, LL Cool J, Eric B and Rakim promoted new trends of brand-name tracksuits and shoes, oversized jackets, shirts, brand-name sneakers, large shoelaces, large gold jewellery and haircuts such as the Jheri curl and high-top fade, popularised by actor Will Smith. “No matter how hideous some clothing would be, if the famous rapper wore it, you could almost guarantee that the youth would wear it also” (Weston-Thomas, 2001-11). It is believed that the heavy gold “bling” jewellery was influenced by traditional adornments of Africa (3Tack Production, 2011). For hip-hop groups like Run-DMC, fashion was particularly important, and in 1986 this group released the song *My Adidas*, ultimately to celebrate the street garb and fashion designs by Adi Dassler. This presented expressions of identity within certain groups, especially in America, and made the street-wear style very popular; it was not just another commodity in society, it has become a renowned style (Baudot, 1999; 297).

Although the 1980s fashion was quite distinctive and successful, certain styles began to filter into mass marketing, thus becoming watered-down versions. Applied decoration on many clothes during this decade pandered to the ideals of a time of conspicuous consumption and the covetous desire for fashionable clothing. It became a time of materialism, with individuals wanting most commodities in fashion and lifestyle. This led to the excessive use of credit cards and eventually considerable debts for many, as it was the only way to acquire the choice lifestyle (Weston-Thomas, 2001-11). Haute couture became scarcely important or worthwhile for creation due to the limited turnover from the minority of rich clients. However, it remains as one of the most important advertisements for dominant fashion houses; “they serve the reputation and add value to the label – and more than ever, it is the label that influences customers, in the area of young fashion as much as in the luxury sector” (Lehnert, 2000; 93).

Throughout earlier decades, fashion was important for everyone, fresh styles would usually generate people to accept and wear the fashion. Starting from the 1980s and continuing today, fashion seems to be anything we want. Conformity is no longer an issue, we can make fashion for ourselves, mix and match, be comfortable in anything and shape our own identity. “Shopping malls have become major sites of leisure activity, the

pilgrimage is enough even without the act of buying. We no longer conform to the traditions of the old occupational cultures, and instead we choose a lifestyle, we are no longer expected to conform. This term, not in itself a new one, was taken by the advertising and designer culture of the 1980s to stand for the individuality and self-expression that was the cornerstone of the free market revolution of that decade” (Watson, 1998; 55).

In conclusion, fashion of the 1980s was, in some ways, simply another commodity, as people recognized fashion as a way to portray certain identities or gain a high status appeal. It was common to achieve identical looks to famous celebrities or models; vogue thus became the commodity to do so. Mass production of modern commodities like fashion soon took place, primarily to support the desire of wanting choice lifestyles and prestige in the realm of public relations. Fashion designers made their way to success through dominant fashion houses, writing history as they progressed, and indeed influencing many prominent styles today.

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