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A TALE OF INSCRIPTION/FASHION STATEMENTS

Kim Sawchuk

"... so many political institutions of cryptography."

Jacques Derrida
Scribble (writing-power)

Still Life

Let me begin with two allegories, two dreams, for it is precisely the question of allegory and representation in relationship to the social sciences, particularly cultural studies and feminism, which is at issue in this paper. The first is taken from literature, the second from experience.

In Franz Kafka's short story, "In the Penal Colony", an explorer is invited to the colony to observe and report on its system and method of punishment. At the colony, the explorer is introduced to a machine, a fantastic machine upon which the condemned are placed and their punishment meted. However, prior to their placement on this machine the condemned have been told neither their sentence nor their punishment; knowledge of their transgression and the lesson they are to learn from it will be inscribed on their bodies by vibrating needles as the inviolable dictums of the community such as "Honour thy Superiors" or "Be just" are written into their flesh in a beautiful and decorative script.[1]

Meanwhile, it is November in Toronto, and my mother visits me. We travel to Harbourfront which is packed with holiday shoppers. The crowds circulate throughout the complex amongst the glittering gold and silver decorations in a frenzy of buying and selling. Mannequins have

been strategically placed throughout the mall to draw attention to and create desire for the fashions that are for sale.

As we approach these dolls our sensibilities are startled. What we have taken to be plastic models are, in fact, flesh and blood women imitating replicas of real women; representations of representations, women who cannot move, cannot respond to the excited gestures of this mob of consumers. Having exchanged their mobility for a wage, they are compelled to stand in awkward poses for extremely long durations of time while curiosity seekers gaze at them, poke fingers in their direction to force a smile, a movement, and photograph this spectacle of female beauty.

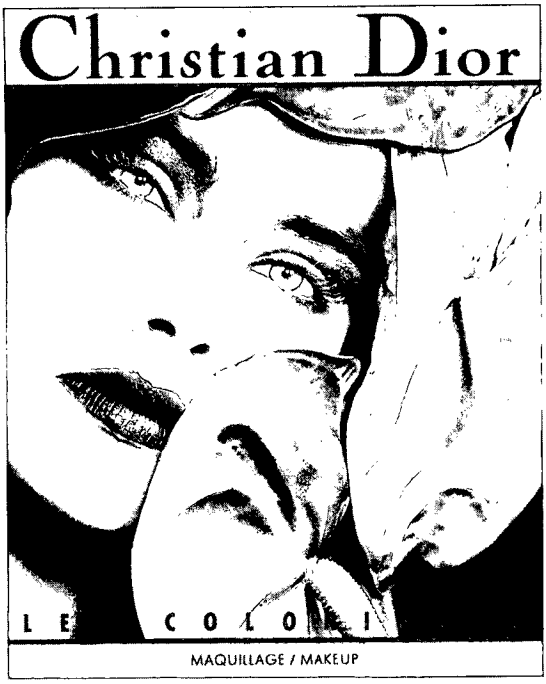
The Object of Fashion

Fashion: what, or whom, are the objects of its discourse? It is a subject without the institutional support or legitimacy granted to other academic subjects, save a few obscure accounts of changes in dress and costume, fleeting references to fashion in the history of European commerce and trade, and the occasional semiotic analysis.[2] What is most conspicuous is the lack of material on the subject, a subject which raises both metaphysical and political questions.

Perhaps this is because, as a topic, we do not know how to frame it, how to address the questions it asks of us. Films, books, photographs, paintings, are all bound by a border that renders them analysable. However, the question of what constitutes the field of fashion is far more ambiguous. As I will argue, it is a phenomenon which threatens the very stability of segregated zones: man/woman, subject/object, the personal/political, reality/illusion. The body, lying in both the realm of the public and private, is a metaphor for the essential instability of objects in their relationship to each other. Like a fence, or the bar between signified and signifier, it is bound to both, but the property of neither.

As Kafka's allegory reminds us, when we are interested in fashion, we are concerned with relations of power and their articulation at the level of the body, a body intimately connected to society, but which is neither prior to it, nor totally determined by it. For example, in the 1950's Frantz Fanon commented on the French colonial government's attempt to destroy Algerian society by outlawing the veil under the guise of liberating Algerian women.

> The way people clothe themselves, together with the traditions of dress and finery the custom implies, constitutes the most distinctive form of a society's uniqueness, that is to say, the one that is most immediately perceptible.[3]



Whether naked or clothed, the body bears the scatalogical marks, the historical scars of power. Fashionable behaviour is never simply a question of creativity or self-expression; it is also a mark of colonization, the "anchoring" of our bodies, particularly the body of women, into specific positions, and parts of the body in the line of the gaze.

In this respect, it is ironic that the French Fashion conglomerate Christian Dior's summer make-up line was titled "Les Coloniales". "Les Coloniales" with an 'e' on the end to signify woman as the colonized subject at the same time as she is elevated to the level of the exotic. European woman, whose unveiled white skin, blue eyes exuding "the coolness of water and shade", peers from behind a cluster of bright red flowers. From a distance, these flowers seem to be a traditional headscarf. On closer inspection it is clear that they are anthriums, whose phallic resemblance cannot be coincidental. The bloody history of French colonialism and the Algerian war is magically transformed, re-written eyebrow pencils and lipgloss. The white light of the camera attempts to erase the lines and creases of this history which might be sedimented on the face of this woman; "White mythology," a cool and distant look has displaced the face of the desert. "Les Coloniales" is an appropriate third metaphor in our triumverate of allegories.

Theoretically, it is tempting to interpret Kafka's allegory, Harbourfront, and "Les Coloniales", as relatively clear examples of how ideology

functions; patriarchal ideology to repress women, white mythology to distort the reality of colonialism. However, these images are more paradoxical than is obvious at first sight. "Fashion", like "woman" is not an undifferentiated object in-it-self which suddenly appears on the stage of history; nor should it be easily reduced to a mere reflection of social and economic developments, to what Freud called a "master key" which seems to account for the manifestation of the object. Within both Marxism and feminism there is the tendency to treat the object as simply a reflection of social movements, or as an index of the horrific effects of capitalism. It is this analysis which currently dominates the feminist and Marxist interpretation of fashion and popular culture.

For example, Anne Oakley, in her section on fashion and cosmetics in *Subject Women*, says that certain styles of dress reflect specific ideologies. In periods of feminist rebellion, women have called for changes in dress towards "a plainer, more masculine style of dress."[4] In the modern era, types of dress, such as work boots or spike heels indicate either the radical or conservative nature of female subjects in a relatively transparant manner.

Furthermore, women's relationship to fashion and the fashion industry is said to reflect the positioning of women within patriarchal capitalism. Women in European cultures have been socialised to be passive objects: they "appear," while men "act." Many feminists draw upon John Berger's *Ways of Seeing*,[5] in which he argues that the history of European painting shows that the looks of women are merely displays for men to watch, while women watch themselves being looked at. This determines both relationships between men and women, women's relationship to other women, and women's relationship to themselves.[6] Whenever women look at themselves, they are acting like men. Laura Mulvey's seminal article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", develops this concept of the gaze in its three manifestations, objectification, narcissism, and fetishism, as predominantly gender-determined and male, in relationship to film.[7] Like the women at Harbourfront, whether through economic necessity or their internalization of patriarchal values, they turn themselves into objects for this gaze and further reinforce this phallic economy of desire.

Women's love of clothes, cosmetics, jewellery, their obsession with style and fashion, reinforces the myth that we are narcissitic and materialistic. In turn this reinforces capitalism, which depends upon this obsession with our bodies for the marketing of new products. Griselda Pollack's work expands on this thesis by showing how the solidification of the identity between a woman's body and the notion "for sale" is an extension of the tradition of European high art within popular culture.[8]

There is an element of truth to these arguments, given the historical development of the advertising and clothing industry. But they tend to fall within the trap of decoding all social relations within patriarchy and capitalism as essentially repressive and homogeneous in its effects. As Teresa de Lauretis explains, the visual world is treated as a series of static representations. It is assumed that images are literally absorbed by the viewer, that each image is immediately readable and meaningful in and of itself, regardless of the context, the circumstances of its production, circulation and reception. The viewer, except of course for the educated critic who has learned to see beyond this level of deception, is assumed to be immediately susceptible to these images.[9]

However, fashion, like social being, is constituted through the effects of language, through the circulation and vagaries of discourses which affect the very nature of its images and its objects. Derrida writes:

> Whether in the order of spoken or written discourse, no element can function as a sign without referring to another element which itself is not simply present. This interweaving results in each "element" — phoneme or grapheme — being constituted on the basis of the trace within it of the other elements of the chain or system. This interweaving, this textile, is the *text* produced only in the transformation of another text. Nothing, neither among the elements nor within the system, is anywhere ever simply present or absent. There are only, everywhere, differences and traces of traces.[10]

It for this reason that I emphasize that these inscriptions of the social take place *at* the level of the body, not *upon* it. We must take care in our own theoretical discourse not to position the body or the social in a relationship of radical alterity to one another. Neither fashion nor woman can be seen as objects determined simply by two variables, such as sex and class, for they are constructed in this fabric of intertextual relations. At any specific historical juncture, fashion is located in a discourse on health (corsets, suntanning, fitness), beauty (ideal shapes of breasts, buttocks or lips), morality and sexuality (dress as sign of one's moral fibre), the nation and the economy (the question of the veil in Algeria), and location (climate, geography, seasonal variations), to name only a few possibilities. These discourses involve the body, produce the body as a textured object with multi-dimensional layers, touched by the rich weave of history and culture.

The intertextual constitution of subjectivity and objects has repercussions for what has been the standard Marxist and feminist interpretation of fashion; fashion as a reflection of the social onto the body, fashion as the repression of the natural body; fashion simply as a commodity to be resisted; fashion as substitute for the missing phallus. Derrida's description of intertextuality is, I believe, theoretically related to the concept of allegory developed by Walter Benjamin, and to Freud's critique of previous methods of dream analysis. Both writers challenge the relative

transparancy of the object as simple sign, symbol or icon.[11]

In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud noted that the difference between his theory and past methods of dream analysis was that for him, "...memory is not present at once, but several times over, that is, laid down (*neiderlegt*) in various species of indications [*Zeichen*, lit. signs]..."[12] He emphasized that dream interpretation must begin its analysis "en detail," not "en masse," as dreams are of a composite character, and as such, are often confusing.[13] He suggested that there were three understandings of this relationship, and three techniques of dream analysis: the symbolic, which "seems to be a relic and a mark of a former identity;"[14] decoding, which "treats events as a kind of cryptography in which each sign can be translated into another sign having a known meaning in accordance with a fixed key"[15]; and a third method which is one of interpretation, of deciphering.

> My procedure is not so convenient as the popular decoding method which translates any given piece of a dream's content by a fixed key. I on the contrary am prepared to find that the piece of content may conceal a different meaning when it occurs in different people or in various contexts.[16]

The memory of events, and of history, is never completely transparent; it is constantly rewritten or overdetermined by present cultural practices. For this reason, language and culture should not be understood as symbolic, for this implies that they are fixed within the chain of signification or in relationship to the "signified." It is this critique of culture as symbolic (i.e., expressive) that is at play in Benjamin's cultural analysis.

Benjamin's study of baroque drama and its allegorical nature critiques the concept of the symbol from the perspective of its ahistoricity. "The measure of time for the experience of the symbol is the mystical instant in which the symbol assumes the meaning in its hidden, and if one might say so, wooded interior."[17] Instead, allegory treats each object as a cultural ruin in which the temporality of all life is encapsulated. Quoting Dante, Benjamin noted that the basic characteristic of allegory is its absolute fluidity, where "any person, any object, any relationship can mean absolutely anything else".[18]

> The basic characteristic of allegory, however, is ambiguity, multiplicity of meaning; allegory and the baroque, glory in richness and meaning. But the richness of this ambiguity is the richness of extravagance; nature, however, according to the old rule of metaphysics, and indeed, also of mechanics, is bound by the law of economy. Ambiguity is therefore always the opposite of clarity

and unity of meaning.[19]

A shop window, a photograph, or the line of a song, these fragments or ruins are the most significant aspect of any dream or culture. It is this potential richness of objects, their infinite number of associations, and their possible reconstellation in another field which makes dream analysis, and all interpretation, tentative rather than subject to rational decoding.

The "meaning" of cultural phenomena is neither expressive of one or two primary social relations, nor is it "symbolic". One cannot assume that a crucifix worn by Madonna is an expression of her essentially Christian nature, or that the wearing of high heels reflects a woman's identification with a patriarchal sexual economy.[20] Part of the challenge of alternative fashion adherents has been to dislodge and re-appropriate the traditional significance of fetishised objects. Spike heels, fishnet stockings and crucifixes juxtaposed with black leathers and exaggeratedly teased hairdos were all adopted as costumes by punk women. Not only did this condense different and often disparate styles, but it pushed the most common indices of femininity to their extreme limits, in order to draw attention to its artificiality and construction. Of course, as in the case of Madonna, these trends were re-appropriated by capitalism and the fashion industry as quickly as they appeared, necessitating yet another transformation in style for those interested in establishing an alternative to the industry.

Feminist criticism must regard events, objects, images, as cultural signs or allegories which do not have one fixed or stable meaning, but which derive their significance both from their place in a chain of signifiers, a chain which is itself unstable because of the constant intervention of historical change. Allegories are like the fragments of a dream in which remembrances of the past leave their historical traces, at the same time overdetermining future interpretations of events by an individual subject.

This makes the question of political or aesthetic judgment more complex than the discourses of Marxism and feminism which have only allowed the dichtomization of the world into polarities; man/woman, capital/labour, bourgeiosie/proletariat. Judgments have to be made within the context of discursive situations making a fixed position on any one issue problematic. For example, as Fanon notes in the case of Algeria, the veil was assigned a significance by the colonist that it had not had. "To the colonist offense against the veil, the colonised opposes the cult of the veil."[21] In other words, it was the highly charged atmosphere of the national liberation struggle, as well as the attempt by the French to "Westernise" Algerian women which lead to the polarization of positions.

Likewise, within the history of the dress reform movement, judgments about 'fashion' itself must be understood in the context of our predominantly Christian heritage. Contrary to the assumption of Anne Oakley, an anti-fashion discourse cannot be assumed to be inherently feminist, for it has often been tied to a discourse which is intent on repressing women's potentially subversive sexuality and returning them to the proper sphere of the home. In many writings from the early 19th and 20th century, fashion was anthropomorphized into a tyrant, who was said to deprive all, and women in particular, of their freedom and money, block them from more fulfilling pursuits, jeopardize their health, and drop them into the stagnant waters of immorality. As Pope Pius said in 1940, women who were bowing to the tyranny of fashion were "like insane persons who unwittingly threw themselves into fires and rivers."[22] In fact the dress reform movements of the early 20th century were often less concerned with making women more comfortable than with returning them to the proper sphere of the home; they were part of the movement for social purity. Just as improper dress indicated a woman's lack of reason and her immorality, a proper form of dress was said to enhance her "natural" beauty, emphasizing her health and freshness, and promising her fecundity.[23]

A woman's concern for the aestheticization of her body was seen as a sign of her unreasonableness, her potential weakness in contrast to the rationality of men. The argument for austerity in dress and the return to more neutral forms not only valorizes what is seen as characteristic of men (their rationality), but there is the possibility that an anti-fashion sentiment feeds into an already existing discourse of woman's superficiality, duplicity, and the threat that her sexuality poses to men.

Not only does this discourse falsely believe that there is a natural beauty, a core of being beyond socialization, but this position can be accused of a typically 'masculinist' belief that one can be transcendent to one's body; to one's culture, and immune to the seductions of the material world. Although one should not invest one's identity in crass consumer behaviour, it is neverthless true that you are what you eat, wear, and consume; as Spinoza said, there is no separation between the formation of mind and its ability to recollect, to remember, and the impingment of the senses onto our subjectivities. To believe otherwise is to engage in a Cartesian opposition between the 'in-itself' and the 'for-itself'.

The problem in all of these cases is not that we respond in a sensual manner to the world, but the fixing or territorialization of desire into a restricted economy: the closure on erotic pleasure that the culture industry can create by reinforcing and fixing very specific notions of what is desirable in women, in men, in sexuality, in clothing, and its hegemonic

control over the "imaginary" through its domination of cultural mediums. While promising Nirvana to all, the restricted economy limits the flow of goods and services to those with access to capital thus reproducing the forms of class domination; it creates desires while denying them and making them dependent on the flow of capital. In phrasing the necessary critique of capitalism, one must be careful not to lapse into a discourse of economy and restraint, which opposes the ethics of thrift, hard work, and self-discipline to the 'immorality' and 'decadence' of capitalism. As Neitzsche says in *The Will to Power*, "residues of Christian value judgments are found everywhere in socialistic and positivistic systems. A critique of Christian morality is still lacking."[24] Perhaps capitalism's only saving grace is the decadence that it produces, its excesses and surpluses, that allow the person who delights in its cast-offs to live a parasitical existence on its margins.

To assume that all clothing is reducible to the fashion industry in this restrictive sense, and that all looking, and aestheticization of the body is an objectifying form of commodification is simplistic. As Marx himself noted, objectification is part of the process that allows human beings to create themselves, their social relations, and their history.[25]

As Laura Mulvey has argued the film industry has capitalised on scopophilic pleasure. However, one must be careful in transferring paradigms from film theory, which tends to concentrate solely on the notion of the look, and on the eye as the primary organ of experience. Clothing, the act of wearing fabric, is intimately linked to the skin, and the body, to our tactile senses. As author Jean Rhys reflects, women have been sensitized to the relationship between their personal and cultural history as it is inscribed in their clothing. "It is as though we could measure the degree of happiness of particular events in her life through the clothing she was wearing and the rooms she inhabited."[26] Fashion and clothing — being stylish — can also be a poetic experience, intimately connected to the history and remembrance of the lived body. Again it was Freud who suggested the importance of material objects, of memories of clothing, jewellery, in triggering memory and overdetermining thought and action in both the waking and dream states. Because the fashion industry is constantly resurrecting histories and cultures, placing us all in a perpetual schizophrenic present, the experience of fashion and clothing is contradictory for women. It is, perhaps, this longing for a world of fantasy, this desire for the return, and the smell and touch of the body which the fashion industry (in fact all of our sentimental culture) capitalizes on. The acts of shopping, of wearing an article of clothing, of receiving clothing as a gift, can be expressions of recognition and love between women, or between women and men, which should not be

ignored, though they may fail to transcend the dominant phallic economy of desire.

Simulation and Representation: the Object in Postmodern Culture

The foregoing analysis is not intended to suggest that we totally reject a Marxist analysis of the commodity or the feminist analysis of patriarchy; but the metaphysical assumptions in place within these discourses must be rethought, rearticulated, reinscribed, for they have produced a history of theoretical closure regarding fashion.

The latter, I believe, has come about for two reasons. First, it seems as if the idea of fashion has been articulated so closely with women, the body and the personal, and therefore with doxa, unreason, and the inessential, that it has been ignored by academic institutions dominated by a sort of antiseptic Platonism. Secondly, and concomitantly, the study of fashion has required a methodological shift in the social sciences: not just a shift from the idea of cultural phenomenon as symbolic or expressive of some fundamental social relation, but away from a metaphysics of presence which favours denotation over connotation, as in semiotics, and use-value over exchange value, as in Marxism. This critique of the metaphysics of presence links the work of Benjamin and Derrida to that of Baudrillard. Some aspects of feminist thought, which criticize fashion on the basis of its 'misrepresentation' of women, and advocate a return to the 'natural' body, and 'natural' beauty have also had to be abandoned. Moving beyond these polarizations makes possible a more in-depth reading and understanding of fashion.

A discourse of representation, which is connected to the concept of the symbol, is inappropriate for an analysis of fashion; yet as we have seen, this is the basis of the majority of writings on fashion. What the phenomenon of women imitating models brings into play is the question of the real, of the referent, as in any sense originary in (post-) modern culture. The live mannequins mentioned in my second allegory do not startle us simply because these women have been reified into a stationary position; they shock us precisely because we are living in an age which anticipates an image. The present era, the age of the postmodern, marks a collapsing of the space of these borders. Reality, the referent, is called into question at that juncture where artificial signs are intertextually mixed with 'real elements.'

In this sense, Kafka's allegory, "In the Penal Colony," does not signify a modern form of repressive, administrative power; what it seems to signal is the end of a mapping of a predetermined code of the social onto the body. The latter was a judicial form of power based on the notion of the pre-existing authority of the norm, or the rules of a cohesive community over the individual body. It is the system of justice and

control of the explorer, rather than the keeper of the machine, who will triumph in the postmodern era, the age of late capitalism. Gone is the archaic writing machine which treats the body as a *tabula rasa* upon which a predetermined message is scrawled. In the present age, forms of self-discipline prevail the self colonization of the body and its enslavement in an intertextual web.

Baudrillard's writings explore the demise of any transcendental posture that one may be tempted to adopt in cultural critique. He states:

> The first implies a theology of truth and secrecy (to which the notion of ideology still belongs), the second inaugurates an age of simulacra... in which there is no longer any God to recognize His own, nor any judgement to separate the true from the false, the Real from Artificial resurrection, since everything is already dead and risen in advance.[27]

The power of late capitalism is in the imaginary, where subjects are maintained in a circuit of desire and anxiety. Baudrillard's work echoes Kafka's sentiments, and is seminal for further discussions of the implications of the fashion industry within the present economy. "Abstraction today is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror, or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or sub-stance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality; hyperreality."[28]

Fashion, with its lack of commitment to this world, with its attempt to create clothes, figures, looks that are irreverent, towards any form of natural beauty, is emblematic of this "precession of simulacra", and the dis-simulation of the logic of the symbol and representation. Baudrillard terms this collapse and instability of border an implosion — "an absorption of the radiating model of causality, of the differential mode of determination with its positive and negative electricity — an implosion of meaning. This is where simulation begins."[29]. Where simulation begins, the notion of representation ends. The failure of the distinction between poles marks the age of the politics of simulation, embodying both the potentially liberating collapse of old borders, while at the same time making possible hegemonic manipulation through control of capital flow and the production of new technologies.

However, the history of this implosion, this circuitry, is not simply a modern phenomenon. Baudrillard's radical deconstruction of these poles is both epistemological and historical. In fact, the archeology of this tendency for the implosion of the space between the imaginary and the real can be seen in the relationship between the naked body and the development of clothing styles. As Anne Hollander shows in her book, *Seeing Through Clothes*, styles of the female body have changed; indeed,

the figures admired and hence idealized within the tradition of nude art are themselves shaped by current clothing styles. For example, in Europe, the upper body, i.e. the breasts, was strictly corsetted to emphasize the sweeping outward curve of the belly. Nude paintings which were thought to reflect the natural shape of the body, in fact retain the shape of these clothes; what is depicted by the artist as a "natural body", a representation of a woman's figure, is itself overdetermined by these fashions.[30] Thus, a neat causal relationship between an object and its transcription in some form of "writing" is problematic. It implies that there is an objective reality outside of the critic or artist — a natural body as the originary site — depicted or distorted by mass culture; but images are not mimetic of a natural world prior to representation. As Barthes says, "your body, the thing that seems the most real to you is doubtless the most phantasmic."[31] Not only does a feminist politics based on a notion of representation, on a return to the natural body, or neutral forms of dress, ignore the pleasures involved in the possession of an article of clothing, but the impossibility of this return to the represented.

This process is exacerbated in the era of postmodernism, where technologies make possible the doubling of life, giving a new force to the powers of the imaginary and the memory trace to dominate and completely substitute the real. Baudrillard's social theory, like Derrida's philosophy and Freud's psychoanalysis, signals the continual collapsing of the scene and "the mirror," the prerequisite for any notion of representation as reflection or imitation:

> ... instead there is the scene and the network. In place of the reflexive transcendence of mirror and scene, there is a smooth, non-reflecting surface, an immanent surface where operations unfold – the smooth operational surface of communication.[32]

This smooth operational surface which ruptures the depth model implicit in classical Marxist humanism inaugurate a different notion of causality: neither 'expressive,' nor simple structural, it questions the possibility of isolating all determinations of a given phenomenon, object, or event.

All of the social sciences have been predicated on a notion of system, either as a relatively stable set of signifiers, as in semiotics, or upon the isolation of a community, as in Marxism, in which human activity is localizable in space and time, generalizable because common meanings are shared amongst its members. Baudrillard's analysis of postmodernity, or late capitalism, throws these assumptions into question. As Philip Hayward notes in "Implosive Critiques," Baudrillard problematizes the notion of a cohesive social upon which the disciplines are based.[33] In a world of fluidity and fragmentation in which the stable boundaries of traditional communities such as the family, the church and the nation are

in constant disruption, relocation, and solidification into exaggerated forms, we need a new methodology to complement these transformations.

One way to approach the fragmentation of the social is to study cultural signs as allegorical objects which have a multiplicity of possible meanings rather than any one fixed interpretation. This is not simply an idle, idealistic or nihilistic pursuit. As Elizabeth Cowie explains, meaning is never absolutely arbitrary in any text.

> Rather, the endless possible signification of the image is always, and only a theoretical possibility. In practice, the image is always held, constrained in its production of meaning or else becomes meaningless, unreadable. At this point the concept of anchorage is important; there are developed in every society decisive technologies intended to fix the floating chains of signifieds so as to control the terror of uncertain signs.[34]

The contradiction within any analysis is that in order to communicate, one is faced with having to "modify" a text; that is, to classify and identify the regime of codes which govern its production, while being vigilant to their inevitable mutation. Benjamin's concept of allegory, like Derrida's notion of intertextuality, is a strategy of reading which opens up the possibility of deciphering, rather than decoding, the fashion object and other cultural texts. Decoding, as Freud explicated, implies that there is a master system to which all signs can be returned; deciphering, on the other hand, implies that we are cognizant of the instability of all meaning.

This method, or anti-method — *allegoresis* — takes cultural sign objects as emblematic. As Benjamin said "Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things."[35] Like all forms of cultural production, fashion cannot be considered a mere expression of the current *Zeitgeist*, for it is a constituent relational element in the fabric of the social.

Conclusion

Capitalism and the Colonization of the Imaginary

I began this excursion into a discussion of fashion with two dreams, supplemented by a third; a dream of inscription of the social, the mapping of a typically modern form of power onto the body, and its eclipse in the era of postmodernism with its dependence on an abstract disembodied form of self-discipline; secondly a dream of a woman caught, trapped, embedded within a circuitry of power, of competing discourses which not only position her, affect her, but name her "Woman" as distinct in nature and temperment from "Man", thus

creating as both subject and object; thirdly, a dream of a resurrected past, capitalism's cannibalization of the other, its treatment of them as already dead museum pieces, and its resurrection of them as fashion — the colonialism of advanced capitalism powered by the energy of seduction and desires.

The use of allegory in relationship to fashion and postmodernism is appropriate, given postmodernism's use of allegory as a form of artistic practice and criticism, and given the breakdown of stable communities upon which the social sciences base their use of representation as a concept for giving meaning to behaviours. In the place of 'real communities' and the 'social', a simulated community is born; tribes of consumers who buy Tide, T.V. families on shows such as Family Feud, the world in Harmony as in the Coke commercials, a world that we may not feel compelled to conform to but which offers itself to us as a type of hyper reality. Capitalism operates in full knowledge of the power of the imaginary, of our desire to join into these masquerades, and re-creates the social as a series of dream-works, much like the landscapes analysed by Freud in *The Interpretation of Dreams*.

The imaginary, as Freud, Lacan, and Althusser knew, must be taken seriously because it has very real effects; any rigid separation between the two realms is impossible. In fact, both zones, if indeed there are only two, are always overdetermining, collapsing in on each other. It is the imaginary which informs what is to be our experience of both past and future. Hence, the colonization that capitalism achieves is also an imperialism of the imagination — not just domination over such physical spaces as the third world.

Indeed, as postmodernist forms of architecture such as the Eaton's Centre in Toronto, the new Air Canada Building in Winnipeg, and the West Edmonton Mall indicate, this resurrection of defunct fictions can either be a pleasurable fantasy or a nightmare. In these architectural dreamscapes one can experience life in a Paris cafe, on a beach in Miami or in a submarine, without ever having to leave one's province or suburb. On the other hand, many other pieces of postmodern architecture are a direct reaction to the monumentalism of modernist style, which reduced every city to the megalopolis, and flattened every indigenous horizon to "the Same".

Postmodernism fluctuates between the poles of kitsch and a return to the local. It is both a form of populism, and a totally artificial rendering of history and space. Pee Wee Herman's America is the best example of this hyper-reality: it results in more livable spaces at the same time that it degenerates into a celebration of consumer culture.

Likewise, postmodern thought does not merely extoll naively what Frederic Jameson describes as the superficial and artificial surface. It is

pragmatic in its realization that the modernist valorization of the real and of authenticity was insensitive to the superficial. Modernism tended to be a romantic discourse, it longed for a return to some prehistoric origin, and positioned itself, as educated critic outside and above the culture it criticised — in the place of God. While modernism valued what it took to be the essential, the real, the substantial over the ephemeral, the imaginary, the formal, postmodernism has been engaged in questioning these divisions, and this transcendental position. As I have argued, this was a most dangerous abdication of power. Postmodern thought realises the full ability of capital to capitalize on every alternative discourse, every act of charity, every emotion and sentiment. Therefore it forces one to adopt the strategy of guerilla warfare, of insurgency, interference and destabilization, rather than the archaic model of revolution that is a part of the language of classical Marxism.

Most importantly, postmodernism enjoins us in the necessity for engaging in a cultural politics, politics that exploits the media, that is based on a language of celebration and ecstasy, as in the most recent efforts of the Toronto Arts Community in bringing attention to the need for sanctions against South Africa. It is not surprising that the most interesting theoretical works and reflections on the state of contemporary culture and politics have come out of art and literary magazines such as *ZG, October, Impulse, Borderlines*, and the French "fashion magazine" *Pole Position*; and that significant interventions in photography and art have come from women such as Mary Kelly, Cindy Sherman, Martha Rosler, Lynne Fernie, and Christine Davis, who have attempted to grapple with these issues, particularly the issue of the representation of women. They do not necessarily offer positive images of women, but they do question the notion of "Woman" as a natural construct. They do not offer solutions, but instead force the readers of their works to develop skills in interpreting and reading. It is important to transmit skills that will allow consumers of capitalism to understand the power of images in general and to question the notion of the immutability of that which we take to be real. It is at this juncture that aesthetic judgment and politics meet.

Social and Political Thought
York University

Notes

1. Franz Kafka, "In The Penal Colony", *The Penal Colony: Stories and Short Pieces*, trans. Willa and Edwin Muir (New York: Schoken Books, 1961), pp. 191-230.

2. The most interesting recent work on fashion is by Valerie Steele, *Fashion and Eroticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985). Roland Barthes, *The Fashion System* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983), is another seminal piece, although it is rife with difficulties for the reader because of its extremely technical semiotic approach to

the topic. Barthes' own critique of this work can be found in *The Grain of the Voice: Interviews 1962-1980*, trans. Linda Coverdale (New York: Hillard and Wang, 1985). As well, I recommend Kathy Meyers, "Fashion N' Passion", *Screen*, vol. 23 # 3 (October, 1983), pp. 89-97., and Rosetta Brooks, "Fashion: Double Page Spread," *Camera-works*, # 17 (Jan./Feb., 1980), pp. 1-20.

3. Frantz Fanon, "Algeria Unveiled", *A Dying Colonialism*, trans. Haaken Chevalier (New York: Grove Press, 1965), p.35. Read Fanon's piece in conjunction with the essay by Jacques Derrida, "White Mythologies", *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982). This "white mythology" contained in the most trivial of objects, the fashion photo for a cosmetic company, is integrally connected to another "white mythology", the history of metaphysics. It is the metaphysical position which privileges the notion of Reason over the emotional and the sensual which I will argue has relegated the topic of fashion to the inessential. Derrida, p. 213.

4. Anne Oakley, *Subject Women* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), p. 82.

5. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1972).

6. Oakley, pp. 45-47. See also, E. Ann Kaplan, *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera* (New York: Methuen, 1983). She says: "The construction of woman as spectacle, internalized, leads women to offer their bodies in professions like modelling and advertising, and film acting, and to be generally susceptible to demands to be made a spectacle." (p. 73).

7. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Women and the Cinema: A Critical Anthology*, eds. Karyn Kay and Gerald Pearcy (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1977), pp. 412-428.

8. Griselda Pollack, "What's Wrong With Images of Women?" *Screen Education*, 3 24 (Autumn, 1977).

9. Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 38. De Lauretis' work provides a clear and cogent summary of many of the theoretical debates within both Marxist, feminist and semiotic analysis as they pertain to the question of the representation of women in film images.

10. Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 26.

11. Walter Benjamin, *The Origins of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: New Left Books, 1977). Given Benjamin's very clear sympathy to the concept of allegory over and against the classical notion of the symbol, it is unfathomable how Lukacs could so misread Benjamin's work. Lukacs, pp. 40-44. Paul de Man's work on allegory and symbol should be read in conjunction with Benjamin. As de Man notes in relation to European literature "... in the latter half of the eighteenth century... the word symbol tends to supplant other denominations for figural language including that of allegory." Paul de Man, "The Rhetoric of Temporality", *op. cit.*, p. 188. For examples of how deeply the concept of the symbol permeates Marxism's understanding of culture as symbolic, see William Leiss, Stephen Kline and Sut Jhally's excellent study, *Social Communication in Advertising: Persons, Products and Well-Being* (Toronto: Methuen, 1986), pp. 55, 66.

12. As quoted in Jacques Derrida, "Freud and the Scene of Writing", *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 206.

13. Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. James Strachey (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1976), p. 178.

14. *Ibid*, p. 468.

15. *Ibid*, p. 171.

16. *Ibid*, p. 179. This distinction originally was brought to my attention in a footnote in a friend's Masters Thesis. Forest Barnett Pyle, "Walter Benjamin: The Constellation of A Cultural Criticism", University of Texas at Austin 1983, p. 51. Pyle attibutes this distinction to Gayatri Spivak, but does not reference a source. I have traced the distinction to Freud.

17. Benjamin, p. 165.

18. *Ibid*, p. 175.

19. *Ibid*, p. 177.

20. The work of Louis Althusser still provides the most important critique of this notion of causality, relating it to the philosophical legacy of Hegel within Marxism. Louis Althusser, *Reading Capital*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: New Left Books, 1970).

21. Fanon, pp. 47-48.

22. Jeanette C. Lauer and Robert Lauer, *Fashion Power: The Meaning of Fashion in American Society* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1981), pp. 73-101.

23. *Ibid*, p. 80.

24. Friedrich Neitzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1968), p. 17.

25. I owe this reading of Marx to another friend, Lori Turner. Lori Turner, "Marx and Nature," unpublished manuscript, York University, 1986, p. 8.

26. Jean Rhys, *Good Morning Midnight* (New York: Harper and Row, 1930), p. 113. See the anthology, *The Female Body in Western Culture: Contemporary Perspectives*, Susan Rubin Suleiman, ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983).

27. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton and Philip Beitchman (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983), pp. 12-13.

28. *Ibid*; p. 2.

29. *Ibid*; p. 57.

30. Anne Hollander, *Seeing Through Clothes* (New York: The Viking press, 1978), pp. 97-104.

31. Barthes, *Grain of the Voice*, p. 365.

32. Jean Baudrillard, "The Ecstacy of Communication", *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*", Hal Foster, ed. (Washington: Bay Press, 1983), p. 127.

33. Philip Hayward, "Implosive Critiques", *Screen*, vol. 28, 3-4-5- (July-Oct., 1984), p. 128.

34. Elizabeth Cowie, "Women, Representation and the Image", *Screen Education*, # 2-3 (Summer, 1977), pp. 15-23.

35. Benjamin, p. 178.

36. Frederic Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society", *The Anti-Aesthetic*, pp. 111-125.

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