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# Bridging the Gap:

## Feminism, Fashion and Consumption

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Angela McRobbie

### Abstract

The article confronts two issues, first the question of women and consumption and second the fashion industry as a feminized sector. In the first instance the argument is that recent scholarship on consumption has been weakened by an inattention to questions of exclusion from consumption and the production of consumption. Income differentials as well as questions of poverty have dropped off the agenda in this debate. Attention instead has been paid to the meaning systems which come into play around items of consumption. This has led to a sense of political complacency as though consumption is not a problem. For the many thousands of women bringing up children at or below the poverty line it clearly is. The second part of the article takes the fashion industry as an example of a field where perspectives on both production and consumption are rarely brought together. This produces a sense of political hopelessness in relation to improving its employment practices, especially for very low paid women workers. The argument here is that greater integration and debate across the production and consumption divide could conceivably result in policies which would make this sector whose employees on a global basis are predominantly female, a better place of work.

### Keywords

gender; consumption; modernity; fashion

### The Social Relations of Consumption

This piece is written partly out of a sense of frustration that so much recent writing on women and consumption has been flawed by an inattention to the processes of exclusion which structure and limit access to consumption. These of course are largely to do with disposable income. But there are additional absences in this work which have to do with specificities and particularities in regard to consumption, that is with how different groups of women, from different class and ethnic backgrounds, actually experience this thing called consumption. Indeed there often seems to be a wilful avoidance of questions of poverty and hardship. Nor is there any emphasis on those who work at producing consumption. Both of these omissions contribute to a sense that 'we' can indeed all consume and that this process

gives rise in our minds to no awkward questions about how much the shop assistant is being paid, or how, having purchased the weekly shopping, we will get through to the end of the month. Consumer culture is instead an arena of female participation and enjoyment. This runs the risk of inducing a sense of political complacency.

When feminist writers and cultural historians attempt to re-investigate the neglected field of consumption by showing how women were produced as the ideal subjects of consumption in early twentieth century America, or with the new role they were given following the growth of advertising and marketing in the inter-war years, or with how women flocked to the department stores, my own reaction is to require some qualifications in this respect. They did not flock equally to consume. Nor was the invitation to consume extended to all women independent of means and status. On both sides of the Atlantic the imagined female consumer was invariably white and almost always middle class. And as we know from the direct experience of being treated with condescension or dismissal in upmarket department stores, shopping may be nominally open to all but this does not stop department stores from screening out 'unwanted customers'.<sup>1</sup> The status of the shop assistant is indicative in this respect. She is typically low-paid but is trained in accent and demeanour, with her job depending on her successful demonstration of these skills, to reflect the high-class quality of the goods. This practice dates back to the early days of the department store when wealthy customers complained of being put off the products by the unhealthy, poor-looking shop girls who were serving them.

For many, if not most, women throughout the periods described by authors such as Pumphrey (1987), Felski (1995), Nava (1996), Bowlby (1985) and Reekie (1995), i.e. from the mid-nineteenth century through the early years of this century, consumption has been an aggravated activity. It has most certainly been linked with the necessity of both paid work and also with unpaid work in the home. If women consumed fabrics, for example, it was to take home and make clothes for themselves and their children, unless of course they could pay other women to do this for them. So the act of consumption was merely the precursor for further domestic labour. While some of the above writers (e.g. Pumphrey and Reekie *en passant*) note the unevenness of women's ability to participate in consumption, the structures which produce and reproduce these divisions and the consequences these have for relations of power and powerlessness tend to be marginalized. Consumption is extrapolated from the broader sociological context in which purchasing is only one small part of a whole chain of productive activity.

As the academic interest in this field gains ground through the 1980s it is also surprising that instead of re-conceptualizing the traditional division

between production and consumption to take into account the multiple levels of social and cultural as well as economic practices which traverse this divide, there is instead, in academic feminism over the last fifteen years, almost imperceptibly, a new division of labour which has emerged. Such a division suggests quite major political differences within feminism, though there is no space here to explore the fine nuances of disagreement and emphasis. Those who engage with issues of consumption (e.g. fashion), but from the viewpoint of production, could be described as 'materialist feminists', while those who are associated with the politics of meaning and with the world of texts and representations could be described as 'cultural feminists'.<sup>2</sup> In the former group figures including Rowbotham and Mitter (1994), Tate (1994) Phizacklea (1990) and others approach the world of goods from the viewpoint of the highly exploitative conditions under which these goods, usually items of fashion or clothing, have been produced by Third World women and children, often in sweat-shop conditions, or else by very poor First World women employed as homeworkers or in the small workshop units of North London and the West Midlands. Meanwhile feminists working in cultural and literary studies often tend to discount or overlook the material context of the production of consumption as indicative of a crudely economic and reductionist approach, untuned to the level and meaning of female popular desires for consumer goods. In fact it is the concept of desire and with it pleasure which partly fuels this approach. Its worth briefly rehearsing that trajectory, as it is aspects of this that I now want to challenge.

The original argument was that the academic left including feminists too often felt the need to disavow their own participation in some of the pleasures of the consumer culture for the reason that these were the very epitome of capitalism and also one of the sources of women's oppression. This produced a culture of puritanism giving rise only to guilty pleasures. The study of popular culture in its most expanded sense allowed feminists to revise this traditional stance. The fact that many of these forms were also enjoyed by ordinary women allowed us to at least re-interrogate this terrain rather than to merely understand it as a site of 'false consciousness'. In addition through the 1980s the growth of a new kind of left and feminist cultural politics which involved exploring how more popular broad-based alliances could be forged made it possible to acknowledge the enjoyment people got from consumption (Hall, 1989; Mort, 1989, 1996). The issue here was of broadening out the political constituency to which the left could legitimately speak by including for example the newly affluent upper working and lower middle classes, i.e. the '*Daily Mail*' terrain of support for Thatcherism. What seemed to happen, however, is that this momentum, combined as it was with speaking to other social identities and movements, resulted in the bottom end (whatever that might mean in economic terms)

of the social hierarchy being dropped from the political and intellectual agenda. This raises the question of the terms and limits of popular left and feminist politics. Is it possible to address the very poor and the pretty affluent in the same political language? At any rate the interest in the practices of consumption was only rarely put to the test in the field of empirical investigation. Instead it was used to flag the conceptual autonomy of consumption away from the more problematic field of production. In effect it was about symbolic complexity, i.e. with all the unexpected things people do with items of consumption (Fiske, 1989). My argument now is that the emphasis has swung too far in this direction with little attempt being made to ask whether it is 'as much fun on the other side of the counter'.<sup>3</sup>

This writing suggests the far distance between contemporary consumer culture and the world of long hours, unrewarding work, drudgery and brutal exploitation. Celia Lury writes, for example, in the introduction to her recent volume that there is a 'relative independence of practices of consumption from those of production', this giving, she continues 'growing power and authority . . . to (at least some) consumers' (Lury, 1996: 4). Clearly this independence is a matter of where you look and where you stand in the labour market. In my own case the reality of homeworking was literally on my front doorstep. Neighbours on both sides of my last home in North London were up all night sewing, the lights were on and the gentle whirring of the sewing machines could be heard through the walls on either side. One was a Greek Cypriot woman whose 'bags' would be delivered early one morning and collected in exchange for finished work the next. On the other side of the wall an Asian grandmother also worked through the night and would then child-mind during the day having deposited her finished goods with her sons for delivery to the various street-markets of North and East London.

While there might be a case to argue that if the materialist feminists like Annie Phizacklea fail to look at what happens to the clothes once they leave the shops and enter the field of symbolic value then it is unfair to accuse the cultural feminists of ignoring questions of production and manufacture. The answer to this has got to be that while ideally both sides might be brought into dialogue with each other, there are more glaring political problems in the cultural feminists' avoidance of all questions of pain and suffering. This means that the whole basis of feminist scholarship, founded as it is upon interrogating issues of gender inequality and subordination, is somewhat jeopardized. Lury, for example, mentions poverty in the opening pages of her book and only returns to it once, fleetingly. 'Deprivation in contemporary Britain is widespread . . . it extends throughout the bottom half of society, becoming particularly acute in the bottom 30–40 per cent' (Lury, 1996: 5). These are hardly insignificant figures for any

discussion of consumer culture, especially if we are concerned with how relations of inequality and of power and powerlessness are reproduced in society. Lury's 'bottom 30–40 per cent' would also doubtless include Phizacklea's Asian women homeworkers. Indeed if we take into account the feminization of poverty, the 'top half' of society with which Lury is primarily concerned becomes top heavy with men, and with white, wealthy middle England married couples. In effect she is talking about the privileged social classes.

The emphasis in the new consumerist studies is on what women and girls do with consumer goods and with how commodities give rise to meaning-making processes which are frequently at odds with the intended meaning or usage. Thus the 'world of goods' offers certain types of 'freedom' or even 'authority' to women as consumers with these taking on overtones of sexual freedoms or transgressive pleasures (Fiske, 1989; Nava, 1992). The strength of the historical case argued by Nava (1996), Felski (1995), Bowlby (1985) and Reekie (1995) hinges around the social reaction to the growth and popularity of female consumption in the late nineteenth century and into the twentieth century. However, the scale of the scandal of feminine pleasures in consumption was as double-edged and ambivalent in Victorian Britain, in America and in Australia, as moral panics are today. What can be read into the titillated, exaggerated over-reactions of the male moral guardians is as much a projection of their fears and fantasies of female sexuality as it is any accurate reflection of what women are doing or thinking about as they walked around the department stores. In other words, fascinating though these accounts may be (and this includes the novels upon which many of these authors are also reliant as evidence), it is historically and sociologically debateable to construct an argument about female consumption in nineteenth-century society by relying on such limited source material.

Women's new public freedom in the new department stores, to browse and wander, to feel the luxurious textures of the silks and laces on display and to linger in the restaurants, described as it is in this context, gives us only the merest hint of the social relations entailed in these leisure practices. Shopping in the grand sense described by these authors was, at that time, for ladies of leisure. Reekie acknowledges this point without further problematizing it: 'the typical drapery store customer in the nineteenth century was a middle-class or wealthy woman' (Reekie, 1995: 7). The precise history of how and where working-class women and girls did their shopping is yet to be written. And who is to say that these same middle-class women were not possibly the sort of customers for whom class antagonism was waged over the counter. Shop assistants played the same sort of role as servants. Theirs was a position of servitude (Benson, 1986). They

could be sacked on the spot for not treating the customers with the correct degree of deference. In these circumstances empowerment and authority can be (and certainly was) as much about power and authority over those deemed socially subordinate as it is (or was) about new female freedoms. This treatment by women who consider themselves socially superior is the sort of experience which anybody who has ever served in a shop has direct experience of and to have this important, indeed even formative moment of social interaction written out of feminist histories of shopping is strange to say the least. In some respects it is a way of avoiding the issue which is that these relations are not just about the neutral-sounding term class differences between women, but are actually about class antagonism. If 'we' feminists now recognize diversity within the category of women, then we must also recognize the consequences of this in terms of both class and ethnicity. Middle-class women can be as much the perpetrators of class inequalities as their male counterparts. The privileges of their social position will inevitably be manifest in those spheres in which they play a key role. Not to acknowledge this as an ongoing issue in feminist scholarship is to exculpate whole social categories of women from responsibility and agency in history on the grounds of their sex. Vron Ware has charted white women's role in the construction of empire and imperialism (Ware, 1992). But we cannot talk about middle-class women 'at home' during the same period unless we are willing to confront some of the social consequences of their status in their everyday environment.

So keen to foreground female pleasures, this work studiously ignores the production of consumption as though it did not exist. This is as true in the historical work on modernity as it is in the recent work on consumer culture. It is as though no women were employed in the low paid retail sector, as though no women worked through the night to 'finish' off the dresses and ball gowns which only a tiny few could afford, and as though no women were employed to service the consumer goods in the home as domestic servants, washing and laundering, repairing and mending, 'dressing' the mistress, looking after her wardrobe and picking her discarded clothes from the floor, i.e. providing the human service needed to allow the consumer goods to function as such.

Feminist critics argue that women as a category have been left out of the great accounts of modernity (e.g. Berman, 1982). But instead of tackling some of the more politically problematic aspects which emerge precisely from all these exclusions from modernity, exclusions without which it could not have constructed its marvellous edifices (see Gilroy, 1993a; Braidotti, 1992), some feminists have chosen to write women back into this history through a focus on consumption and the urban experience and in so doing reproduce these same evasive strategies around class and

inequality. As a result at points they portray a social scenario of delights, pleasures and achievements rather than miseries and exclusions.

In retrieving a presence for middle-class women in the city and arguing this to play a role in the formation of modernity, these authors miss the opportunity of developing a fuller argument which might suggest that it was partly through the various forced exclusions of women into the domestic sphere, into the household world of shopping and into the internalized world of the sexualized body and femininity and maternity that modernity allowed itself to emerge triumphant in the public sphere as a space of white, male, reason, rationality and bureaucracy. While some strata of young middle-class women could be drafted into carrying out the regulatory social work of the city, in the form of philanthropic visiting, their services were quite quickly dispensed of when it came to developing the great infrastructures of state and government.

Mica Nava suggests that Janet Wolff's (1990) argument, that women in the modernity of the late nineteenth century were not able to be 'flâneurs' because they were in the process of being removed from the public sphere of work and the urban environment into the safety of the home and the suburbs, needs to be revised to take into account the new freedom women had to browse and spend time in the department stores. (Wolff actually quite carefully qualifies her claims by emphasizing that she is concerned very much with the literary and poetic accounts which configured the flâneur as observer of modernity. She also notes the inevitable discrepancy between the ideology of domesticity and the reality of working women's lives (Wolff, 1990: 35).) Nava then reminds us of the busy lives of 'middle-class women' who 'travelled with increasing freedom through the streets and open spaces of the city' (Nava, 1996: 43). She also notes how these women 'also visited less salubrious neighbourhoods as part of the proliferation of philanthropic schemes' (Nava, 1996: 944). She continues, 'Indeed in their pursuit of "adventure, self-discovery and meaningful work" many [women] would have ventured into slum territory unfamiliar even to their husbands or brothers' (Nava, 1996: 944). While Nava does then note that 'the visionary element in their activities was perhaps somewhat compromised by the fact that their personal freedom . . . was gained in the process of trying to enforce it elsewhere, on the women of the poorer classes' (Nava, 1996: 44), my own response to this can only be polemical. If the streets were 'notorious' and full of 'disreputable strangers', who were the degraded and impoverished bodies who constituted these social categories? How was their experience of modernity? The power and privilege which allowed this minority of women such 'freedom' cannot in short be understood without taking into account the experience of those many women and girls who were the object of these concerned gazes and for



whom the city was a place of work and livelihood, who lived in 'slum territory' and who travelled about the city not because they had gained some new found freedom but as part of their everyday gainful activities. How else did working women through the centuries get to their work, run errands for their masters and mistresses, take some time for pleasure and enjoyment, and indeed escape the overcrowded conditions of their homes, but by walking about and by hanging about on the streets? Judging by some recent accounts it is as though until middle-class women tested the waters of danger by stepping foot inside a department store or by visiting the poor, the streets of the great cities like London were populated only by men. Apart from anything else this contradicts the historical evidence put forward in Sally Alexander's account of women workers in nineteenth-century London. Alexander quotes Arthur Mumby describing the flow of female labour over London Bridge in 1861 as follows:

One meets them at every step; young women carrying large bundles of umbrella frames home to be covered; young women carrying cages full of hats, which yet want the silk and the binding, coster girls often dirty and sordid, going to fill their empty baskets, and above all female sack-makers.

(Mumby quoted in Alexander, 1976: 73)

What I am arguing is that it makes no sense at all to correct the gender blindness of writers like Berman by writing middle-class women into modernity as consumers or indeed as philanthropists (who were in the privileged position of being able to work unpaid) without also recognizing that the majority of young and old working-class women at this time had to get up at ungodly hours in the morning and walk unchaperoned to their places of work in shops, factories as well as in private homes thus making a remarkable contribution to the *workforce of modernity*. In summary it might be more useful to consider one manifestation of the productivity of power in the late nineteenth century as residing in the complex ways in which some degree of female freedom could be permitted by exacting from these women knowledge of the more dangerous classes obtained through practices of urban surveillance in the form of visiting, etc. At the same time some of these women might well have been so shocked by the poverty and suffering which they witnessed that they indeed became deeply committed to campaigning for political action and reform.

These new consumerist perspectives have emerged out of debates in media and cultural studies which have disputed the image of consumers as manipulable, passive dupes. In the analysis of contemporary consumer society, it has grown out of an awareness that the categories of social class and the traditional place occupied by the working class has undergone rapid and irreversible change in Britain over the last twenty-five years. The focus then

is on how attachments to goods and to the 'social life of things' can in fact be productive of new social identities. On occasion this has allowed contemporary social and cultural theorists to leave class behind. But such social changes along with the intensification of consumption and the apparent access of ordinary people to wide ranges of consumer goods should not be used as an excuse to ignore the limits of consumption and to dismiss the work and wage needed to be able to participate in consumption. Nor should it lead to the abandonment of class as a primary concept for understanding social structure. Class, gender and ethnicity have to be continually re-interrogated for their meaning and they also have to be 'thought together'. The same goes for discussions of consumption. Since women's place in contemporary society has undergone such rapid changes it is also necessary to take these into account. If, for example, 25 per cent of the labour force in Britain now works part-time, and if 65 per cent of these workers are female, and if 42 per cent of births are to unmarried women and 1 in 3 (soon to be 1 in 2) marriages fail, and if 20 per cent of all households are currently headed by an unsupported single mother, and finally if 60 per cent of part-time workers need to rely on income support to bring their weekly income up to a so-called living wage (all figures from *Social Trends*, March 1996), then to talk in uncomplicated terms about women comprising the bulk of consumers without considering the consequences these factors have for participation in consumption, is neither politically nor intellectually viable. These figures make Lury's a conservative estimate of poverty and suggest that most women in contemporary Britain are struggling and making sacrifices to make ends meet.

Perhaps the real issue is that a good deal of the new consumerist studies remain sociologically ungrounded. With the exception of Lunt and Livingstone's social psychological study of attitudes to money and goods, savings and debt (Lunt and Livingstone, 1992), there are few detailed accounts of consumption and I am unaware of any feminist work which is looking at how women actually shop and what sort of issues influence their choices. The only material on this subject, comes, not surprisingly from the poverty lobby and from those concerned with the feminization of poverty (see Brannen and Wilson, 1987). What scanty work there is shows that women most often consume with their families' or their children's needs uppermost in their minds. Women frequently consume on behalf of others. They make personal sacrifices as a matter of course to be able to afford treats and birthday presents for their children and grandchildren. Single mothers often find themselves put under enormous pressures to compensate to their children for not having a father and hence not fulfilling the real family image which prevails in consumer culture by giving into their demands for the latest pair

of trainers (Middleton, Ashworth and Walker, 1994). Indeed the phrase 'giving in' is indicative of all the conflicts and anxieties around consumption.

There is also a complete absence of the position of black and Asian women as consumers. Were this to be done it would surely point to other variables, other clusters of meaning coming into play, many of which would once again tell of memories of poverty, domestic service and of being 'on the other side of the counter'. This is not to suggest that Asian and black women only engage with consumption from the perspective of exclusion, far from it. It is simply more likely that, as with women of working-class origin, it is difficult to embrace the language of the new consumerist studies without questioning the terms of participation. Many women would not want to be understood as participating in the consumer culture with the same casual confidence as their white, middle-class counterparts. Many are (and were) not permitted to, through the subtle grids of classification and distinction which define how and where we consume. Modes of consumption thus become marks of social and cultural difference. Likewise the frustrated experience of exclusions from consumption can be a profoundly politicizing process which forces young people to confront the meaning of class, gender and ethnicity in their own homes, neighbourhoods, schools and shopping centres.

While every young black or Asian woman I have interviewed or spoken to in relation to my current research on the fashion industry (McRobbie, forthcoming) has described their relation to fashion in terms of pleasure and enjoyment they have also all referenced this interest through the language of work and labour.<sup>4</sup> Many of their mothers and grandmothers learnt to sew as a way of avoiding having to clean white people's houses (Wallace, 1996). Sewing and dressmaking were handed down to their daughters as useful skills which would also allow them to produce their own beautiful clothes when they could not possibly have afforded to buy them. This is borne out by the fact that most young women and men of so-called ethnic origin studying fashion design in the art schools and as far as I can ascertain all well-known black fashion designers currently working in the UK come from families where the mother and other women in the house sewed and where the kitchen and living room floors were continually covered in fabric and paper patterns and where sewing and dressmaking (whether here in the UK or else in Jamaica, in Africa or in Asia) was an ongoing household activity. Although much of this kind of domestic work is now being replaced with new cultures of consumption in the form of ready-made clothing purchasable on a global basis, it functions nonetheless as an important, even formative memory.<sup>5</sup>

I want to conclude this section by pointing in turn to some of the political weaknesses of the labour economists and sociologists whose concern is with how low paid work and exploitation provide the cheap goods for western consumers. Feminist writers like Rowbotham, Phizacklea, Tate and others have concerned themselves with the endless relocation of capital to off-shore sites and Free Trade Zones and then back to on-shore even cheaper and local sites offering low cost labour provided typically by immigrant women. They have shown how the opportunity to exploit this powerless labour force of women and children has produced the apparent buoyancy of consumer culture in fashion and in domestic goods in the west from the late 1970s. The problem lies in their reluctance to cross the divide and engage with feminists who are working at other locations in the field of consumer culture. Cultural questions including the symbolic role played by consumer goods cut no ice with these writers. In their work there can be no suggestion that the women and child labourers of these exploitative systems are or can also be participants at some level in consumption. There is certainly no hint of the fact that consumption might also bring some degree of enjoyment beyond the grim reality of earning enough to feed a family. In this respect these writers 'culturally deprive' women workers by so emphasizing 'dignity and daily bread' (Rowbotham and Mitter, 1994). As Stuart Hall has reminded us 'Everybody, including people in very poor societies whom we in the West frequently speak about as though they inhabit a world outside culture, knows that today's "goods" double up as social signs and produce meanings as well as energy' (Hall, 1989: 131).

The message which comes across from this political and intellectual lobby is to boycott all goods found to be produced in low wage, non-union factories or sweatshops. The eventual success of the recent 'anti-Gap' campaign initiated by the Labour Co-ordinating Committee of the US in 1995 was the result of intense struggle and extensive publicity drawing attention to the child labourers used to produce the cheap but high-quality cotton shirts we have come to associate with The Gap. In the end The Gap signed an agreement guaranteeing the protection of human rights to all its employees along with regular inspection of factories. However The Gap is one of thousands of successful retailers and bad publicity does not always lead to manufacturers signing agreements to introduce better working conditions. A recent documentary programme accused Marks & Spencer of exploiting child labour in South East Asia and the response of M&S was to take out a libel action against the TV company on the grounds that it never 'knowingly' employed under-age workers. In Britain, where trade unionism has been more or less decimated (with unions like USDAW barely holding onto any membership whatsoever, and that only in food retail and

not at all in fashion and clothing), and where most fashion manufacturers now run strictly non-union shops, and where anyway most fashion producers work as part of a long and anonymous sub-contracting chain, dispersed across country and city, the prospect of re-unionization and even of a decent battle for a minimum wage is bleak.

There are also limits to the politics of the boycott. Hard pressed consumers will frequently return to the cheap retail outlet when the fuss has died down. This means that in broad political terms the campaigns can only play on people's consciences and as we all know battling against poverty on a global basis is an exhausting and demoralizing struggle. However, the inattention to cultural questions by the materialists and the excessive concern with culture and meaning by those in feminist cultural studies means that an opportunity for dialogue is continually averted. In addition where the materialists look in depth at the scale of exploitation with all the facts and figures at their fingertips, they remain unimpressed it seems by the arguments emerging from the field of post-colonial writing where consumer culture in the form of global communications offers new possibilities for hybridic political alliances (Gilroy, 1993b; Hall, 1996). Meanwhile cultural studies remain relatively oblivious to facts and figures and to the political role they can and do play. But even if these facts and figures are 'fictions', they are useful fictions and the extent to which current talk about consumer culture is ungrounded by sustained historical or sociological research seriously weakens the case of those who suggest the political mobilization that can be done around consumption.

### **Fashion Production, Fashion Consumption**

My argument has been to re-integrate the study of production and consumption and to foreground not just work and employment in the production of consumption but also to take into account the changing nature of work and employment. Given that I have also been arguing for specificity and particularity it makes some sense to end this piece by making some comments about how the British fashion industry looks if we approach it from this more integrative perspective. Given that there has been a concern with political change in this piece I will also argue that indeed the only hope for both the fashion industry per se and for those women employed at each rung on the low pay ladder is to be able to think across the currently unbridgeable gap between textile production (i.e. weaving, fabric-making, etc.); manufacture and design, between sewing and sketching, between serving and being served and between working and wearing.

Fashion is of course an almost wholly feminized industry. Apart from a few men at the top, including manufacturers and retailers, celebrity designers and magazine publishers, it is and has been a female sphere of

production and consumption. For this reason alone fashion is a feminist issue. It comprises of six component parts: manufacture and production; design; retail and distribution; education and training; the magazine and fashion media; and the practices of consumption. If we consider these one at a time, demonstrating their mutual dependence as well as their apparent distance from each other, it is possible to see a set of tensions and anxieties which in turn provide opportunities for political debate and social change. Thinking across the fashion sector in this way also has the advantage of disaggregating what often seem like a series of starkly monolithic institutions. Given the scale and the power of the huge multi-nationals which create the conditions for consumer culture in the west it is often difficult to see a political light at the end of the tunnel, and perhaps it is for this reason that the new consumerist writers place so much emphasis on the subversive things people can do with consumer goods.

Let us look then, briefly at manufacture and production. Phizacklea has already shown that factory production in this country is a sunset industry and the only on-shore activity of any significance comprises of the small sub-contracted units of production often headed by small-scale ethnic entrepreneurs themselves seeking a livelihood in fashion manufacture as an alternative to unemployment (Phizacklea, 1990). The women workers in this sector receive very low pay and are often also homeworkers. There is no significant union recognition nor any likelihood of it. However gloomy though this may seem, self-organization of homeworkers is not unimaginable, as Tate has shown (Tate, 1994). There is no reason why the highly skilled knitters described recently in *The Independent* as supplying the top fashion designers should not find ways of improving their working conditions and their wages (*The Independent*, 24 February 1996). Publicity, lobbying and support from other sectors of the industry including the powerful fashion magazines (and so-called celebrity politics) could achieve a lot in a short space of time. The recent Oxfam Clothes Code campaign has, for example, drawn on figures like comedienne Jo Brand to persuade all retailers to adhere to a code of conduct guaranteeing decent working conditions in all their factories across the world. This sector could also put pressure on government to support further training and education which would allow women to move into better paid and more highly skilled work, as pattern cutters, for example (where there is a skill shortage) and it would also allow them to cut out the middlemen and subcontractors who currently negotiate all costs and take comfortable percentages. Finally this strategy would also allow the low paid women to get closer to the designers and retailers who at present they never see and often don't even know they are working for. British fashion designers typically work on a small scale self-employed basis. Even well-known names frequently employ fewer

than twenty people direct. There is no inherent reason why closer collaboration of this sort could not take place to the mutual advantage of all parties.

Education and training would also have a role to play in this more collaborative strategy. At present fashion design education is too committed to defending the fine art status of fashion to be interested at all in manufacture and production. As a feminine field in the high-culture-oriented world of the art schools, fashion design educators have looked up towards the fine arts for legitimization. But this is helpful neither to the industry as a whole nor to the young fashion design students themselves for whom it is often a mark of professional pride *not* to know how to put in a zip (astonishing though this may be to the outside world; see McRobbie, forthcoming). The vast majority of fashion students never visit a factory throughout their degree. In some ways it is convenient to them not to have to know about how orders are actually put into production and who actually makes them since this would raise the unpleasant question of what sort of wages they are being paid and what sort of working conditions they are being expected to put up with. As one fashion academic said to me, 'It would take all the romance out of it for them.' But not knowing about production and manufacture is also unhelpful to the graduates in the longer term. It leaves them open to exploitation by unscrupulous suppliers and middlemen who over-charge them while massively under-paying their sub-contracted women workers. It means in short that fashion designers don't have the kind of grasp of the industry as a whole that they should have. It is not inconceivable however that at some point with more realistic education and training, young designers might work on a more equal basis with the women who do the sewing and finishing. All it would take would be more open public debate on the fashion industry and also on the unviability of designers making a livelihood for themselves without thoroughly involving themselves at every stage in production and manufacture. Fashion educators, the great majority of whom are women, would also have a clear role to play in this respect.

The designers themselves, most of whom are working in the shadow of unemployment and are or have been dependent on government sponsored schemes like the Enterprise Allowance Scheme and other benefits, might also recognize what they have in common with other women working throughout the industry. The class divide between them and the machinists is not as great as it might seem. Many have mothers who have worked in the industry. In addition fashion designers are as likely to exploit themselves as they are to employ an exploited workforce, so there is a good deal of work of de-mystification and de-glamorization to be done in this respect.

The final three parts of the industry, the magazines, retail and consumption, would also need to be re-conceptualized along the same lines. Fashion

magazines at present have a foolish and unnecessary commitment to avoiding serious or political issues. But this might change. Young women fashion journalists might at some point be willing to persuade their editors that a piece on the exploited labour that goes into a designer dress might be worthy of a few pages. Instead of supporting the fashion industry by producing gushy pages of praise for the work of the new crop of British designers, the magazines could take this kind of risk. Likewise retail workers might recognize themselves to have more in common with other workers in the fashion industry than with those employed in selling food or furniture or whatever. Anyway, given the virtually non-existent rate of trade unionization in this sector, new forms of organization and collaboration would need to be established. Fashion retail staff identify strongly with fashion and less with retail, but they are now employed on short-term, part-time contracts, often they are working largely for commission. Their self-image as working in the glamorous fashion industry must surely be undercut by the reality of knowing that in a few years time possibly with children to support it is unlikely that they would hold onto the job of decorating the shopfloor at Donna Karan. What sort of long-term career is there in fashion retail? At present nobody knows because no research has been done on this side of shopping. Research and public debate would be a useful way of beginning to improve the conditions of women who work in this sector.

This leaves us with the practices of consumption. If consumers were to be thoroughly alerted to the inhumane activities which eventually bring clothes to the rails of many of the department stores in the way that the politics of food production has made some impact on food consumption then pressure might also be brought to bear by consumer organizations for changes in the fashion industry. Many women and girls already deeply object to the 200 per cent (at least) mark up on items of fashion. They know how little the women who produce the clothes get paid and frequently the consumers vote with their feet and look but don't buy, even if they could afford to. The fashion industry knows this to be the case but is at present incapable of thinking reflexively about its own practices. A (New) Labour policy which realistically recognized the British fashion industry as a place of many people's livelihoods and also as a potential site for providing more work on a more secure basis on the longer term, instead of seeing it as a piece of light entertainment, might be better able to translate the desires of many women, including young women, to make a good living in fashion. Often it is through consuming that women want to become producers. The energetic enthusiasm of women across the boundaries of class and ethnicity for fashion could be used to transform it into a better place of work rather than allowing it to remain a space of exploited production and guilty consumption.



## Notes

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Angela McRobbie teaches Sociology at Loughborough University. Thanks to Andrew Ross for inviting me to deliver a version of this paper at the Fashion Victims; Labour, Spectacle and Policy Conference held at New York University in March 1996.

- 1 Some upmarket fashion shops in London now employ doormen/security guards who can stop people from entering if they do not look as though they have the money to buy. They do this by saying that 'the shop is too busy right now', even though it is quite clear to the would-be customers that the shop is in fact relatively empty.
- 2 These political positions could be broadly characterized as traditional socialist-feminism in contrast to variations of the new post-feminism which also embrace so-called identity politics.
- 3 The same argument could be made in relation to recent discussions of the 'pink pound'. What is missing here are the working conditions (i.e. behind the bar) of those mostly young gay men who service this industry. What sort of career is it? What are the pay and conditions?
- 4 This research has involved extensive interviews with young British fashion designers with a view to building up a picture of employment in the creative and cultural sectors.
- 5 I count myself in this category since my own grandmother was a skilled tailoress from Dublin who emigrated to Glasgow in 1915. My own early childhood memories are of her living room floor scattered with pieces of paper patterns and bits of fabric.

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