

Cultural Appropriation - Dandy's, Haute Couture and Lady Gaga

For centuries individuals or societies have used clothes and other body adornment as a form of nonverbal communication to indicate occupation, rank, gender, sexual availability, locality, class, wealth and group affiliation. Fashion is a form of free speech. It not only embraces clothing, but also accessories, jewellery, hairstyles, beauty and body art. What we wear and how and when we wear it, provides others with a shorthand to subtly read the surface of a social situation. (Weston).

During England's Regency era, *Beau Brummell* emerged as an iconic figure, due to his transformative contributions to men's fashion, commonly referred to as 'Dandyism'. *Brummell* rejected the overdone, velvet and lace, styling of the common 'Fop', and created an empire based on understated elegance and perfectly tailored garments (Rogers, 2013). Full length trousers, dark coats, immaculate linen shirts and the absence of elaborate wigs, set the Dandy apart visually. However, the role of the dandy was distinguished as much through behaviour as it was through clothing. Dandy's associated themselves with charm, elegance, composure and independence; '*The dandy is clean. The dandy is neat. The dandy does what he wants, when he wants, where he wants*'. (*Beau Brummell: This Charming Man*, 2006).

'An innate characteristic of human beings is the strive for differentiation' (Weston). Yet, a simultaneous innate characteristic - is their desire to belong. Through fashion, people adorn certain items and take on quantified behaviours, that set them apart from some 'tribes' within their society, at the same time as fortifying their solidarity with others.

The line between subculture as resistance and commercial culture as an aspect of hegemony is in fact very hard to draw. (Hebdige, p357)

In the 21st century, the ladies of the super-exclusive *Haute Couture* club wield their fashion style in an overt display of perceived power and superiority. They pay lavish prices for the prestige of owning clothes that have been hand-made in Paris - an essential ingredient of the *Haute Couture*. The clothes are tailored to fit their unique form (by appointment only) and are owned only by a select few – '*... about 3000 women worldwide can actually afford to buy*

clothes at the highest level, and fewer than 300 buy them regularly' (Weston). They buy into the world of fashion at this extraordinary level, paying upwards of £20,000 for a shirt, in order to set themselves apart from, and above, the rest of society.

The BBC documentary, *The Secret World of Haute Couture* (2013), examines this refined world to discover that apart from the means through which to possess the clothes, members must 'display' a deep appreciation of fashion as art form. In the documentary, many proclaim that wearing the garments feels like an '*extension of themselves*' or as though they have slipped into a '*second skin*.'

The unwritten rules of the club are well understood by the members. Their ultimate goal – the prestige of owning a beautiful Haute Couture garment that is owned by no other. Their ultimate nightmare – the mortification of owning Haute Couture garment that has been worn by a celebrity on a red carpet. They value themselves highly based on their association and assume others do the same (*The Secret World of Haute Couture*, 2013).

Quite differently from the ladies of Haute Couture, the Pop-Star often uses fashion as a source of rebellion from the behavioural dictates of 'polite' society (Hebdige, 1983). *Lady Gaga*, for example, enjoys the '*shock-art-potential*' of fashion and is renowned for her desire to liberate herself through her ability to change (*Gaga by Gaultier*, 2013). Her whacky, unique and often controversial fashion risks were famous before her music was. She understood the importance of differentiating herself so profoundly, that she created a visually spectacular image that she consistently embodies.

I feel the ability to create an alternate fantasy and reality for myself that if I do over and over again, every single day of my life – falling asleep in my wigs and falling asleep in my make-up and my jewellery and my dresses and Gaultier – somehow the fantasy becomes my reality (Lady Gaga, Gaga by Gaultier, 2013)

While her extreme form of expression claims liberation from cultural fashion norms, it also serves as a trapping. It is yet another form of 'representation' that becomes difficult to unbind oneself from, therefore, (potentially) becoming another form of repression.

... 'humble objects' can be magically appropriated; 'stolen by subordinate groups and made to carry 'secret' meanings: meanings which express, in code, a form of resistance to the order which guarantees their continued subordination. (Hebdige, p18)

As members of societies, riddled with a multitude of soul-defining, subcultures, *'Our task becomes like Barthes', to discern the hidden messages inscribed in code on the glossy surfaces of style, to trace them out as 'maps of meaning'.... (Hebdige, p18)*, and, in deciphering their meaning, we *may* come to understand, that everything means nothing.

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