

Ada Efftimova<sup>1</sup>

## MATTER OVER MIND? GENDER'S SUBORDINATION TO CLASS DYNAMICS: A STUDY ON FASHION

**Abstract:** This is an analysis of the interrelation between the social categories of gender and class in fashion, influenced by contemporary sociological theories on intersectionality and the author's own ethnographic research carried out throughout the 2024/25 Fashion and Gender course led by prof. Romana Andò in the Fashion Studies Master's programme at Sapienza University in Rome. The paper offers a Marxist perspective on the gendered commodification of fashion consumer experiences, leaning on the works of Goffman, Bourdieu, Barthes, and Benjamin, among others.

**Keywords:** fashion, class, gender, social capital, cultural capital, consumer, commodification

### Introduction

If there is one thing we have learned through the recent sociological examinations of fashion, it is that contemporary scholarly consensus typically strives to shift the focus from discourse that paints gender as a monolith category and instead actively tries to bridge the gaps between various aspects of sociality—in other words, to focus solely on gender (in fashion and in any other field) would be definitively reductive, as gender itself is a part of a much larger framework of social categorization that inevitably intertwines with various other notions, among which are ethnicity, religion, sexuality, family, culture, and class. While this recent discursive streak bears many merits, and there would certainly be value in exploring all of the mentioned categorical relationships, the focus of this essay will be specifically on the correlation between gender and class, on the importance of class discourse and the lived consequences of class division when it pertains to gendered consumption practices in fashion, and perhaps most importantly: on the core idea that class dynamics, though undoubtedly affected by other social aspects, always dominate and drive human behavior more than any other distinctive category, even subordinating gender itself as a part of the arsenal used to maintain control in class stratification.

This brief analysis of class and gender will include arguments akin to what scholars like Crenshaw<sup>2</sup>, Mohanty<sup>3</sup> and Garland-Thomson<sup>4</sup> have already successfully alluded to when arguing for a more concrete

<sup>1</sup> adaeftimova@gmail.com

<sup>2</sup> **Crenshaw, Kimberle. (1989).** Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics. // *University of Chicago Legal Forum*. Vol. 1989, Iss. 1, Article 8.

<sup>3</sup> **Mohanty, C. T. (1988).** Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses. // *Feminist Review*, 30, 61–88, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1395054>

<sup>4</sup> **Garland-Thomson, R. (2002).** “Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory”. // *NWSA Journal*, 14 (3), 1–32, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4316922>

approach in feminist discourse, which would allow space for intersectionality to flourish. Similar to their critiques toward the larger historical trend in feminist thought which dismisses women's real lived experiences unless they are white, western and able-bodied, this paper will provide an attempt to divert gender discourse's attention to another aspect of social classification—one that I argue trumps all others in influence: the one of class division.

### **In the Spirit of Goffman**

It is only natural, as scholars like Goffman would suggest, that we start from the specific and transition into the general framework of the thesis. In this case, the foundations of this paper are based on and inspired by the sociological analysis of fashion during the 2024/25 Fashion and Gender course, led by prof. Romana Andò, which was offered in the Fashion Studies Master's programme at Sapienza University in Rome. This ethnographic analysis was almost exclusively focused on consumption practices. This warrants the perfectly Goffmanian approach of ethnographic exploration<sup>5</sup> which many of my colleagues applied in their own class presentations during the course. At first, it was an introspection—an analysis of one's own wardrobe and consumption habits, trying to make sense of what clothing represents one's identity best the way it is, the way they fear they could be perceived, as well as the way they would like to be perceived ideally. All of this served to remind us of the fact that, as Goffman himself might say, everything we do can be reduced to a kind of self-branding, a never-ending process of representation in the face of an audience that employs its judgement onto us and thus makes us fear humiliation. It quickly became obvious that different audiences require somewhat varying appearances as well, as evidenced by the very first exercise that we did in class, which very purposefully caught us unprepared and made us reconcile with the fact that the classroom setting is just one of the many types of front stage for representation. No one felt particularly proud to present their outfit on the spot, without any prior warning which they could have used to prepare something more sophisticated in the backstage. It was an accurate depiction of everyday wear, suitable for the academic scene but not necessarily formal or polished enough for a public presentation of that nature.

The wardrobe ethnographic introspection, for which we were asked to delve into our already existing fashion archives, went a step further. Many colleagues noticed preferences and facts about the way they present themselves through fashion for the first time. One such memorable case was an honest confession that the exercise managed to help one of my classmates realize that he does indeed have an identity showcased through his clothing, as he had thought his wardrobe lacked any distinctive themes before examining it closely with the task in mind. Overall, the most widespread sentiment amidst all presentations was the emphasis on comfort with a hint of individuality (typically achieved with the use of accessories or signature colors and patterns), or in other words, a combination of practicality with at least a tinge of aesthetic expression. What was perhaps the most revealing, however, were people's fears in regards to clothing practices. By far, the most largely shared fear, especially among women, was that of being sexualized, sometimes even to the extent of motivating them to opt for a more androgynous look, at least when concerned with everyday wear, which aims to balance masculinity and femininity in a way that does not let their feminine sides make them vulnerable to the sexualizing male gaze.

What is interesting here is that the discourse on sexualization was readily picked up by many sympathetic women in the audience, and yet would not go further than addressing the mere social facts of the patriarchal system, as well as the dominance and normalization of the male gaze in strictly gendered terms. Gendered terms, that is to say, once again, that the discourse on fashion and gender would seldom dare overstep its categorical confines. Men and their incessant gaze, women and their vulnerable bodies, gender non-conforming people and their rebellion against the binary system—this is mostly what it totaled to. It is my view that our class conversations on this topic succeeded in their emphasis on gender norms, yet often missed great opportunities to tie the issues at hand with deeper class structure analysis. Hence, this paper aims to provide a further exploration of what can be said about this

---

<sup>5</sup> **Tseelon, Efrat. (2016).** “Erving Goffman: Social Science as an Art of Cultural Observation”. doi: 10.5040/9780755694785.ch-009, pp. 149–164.

frequently expressed fear of sexualization—one that takes into account a familiar category that is rarely considered—the category of class.

A possible reason for the omission of this category is that an academic setting like ours (and especially in the humanities) tends to put quite a bit of emphasis on discourse while casting tangible material conditions to the side. As class standing seems to be more associated with its financial side, in other words the material wealth of people, it may seem a less important category than the ideological inconsistencies with gender studies that we have seen so far. Just as the distinction (through scholars like Mohanty<sup>6</sup>) between discursive and lived gender experience has been made, we could, and should, tap into the theoretical side of class dynamics as well—after all, even gender discourse itself, as we have found, has shifted into a larger conversation about intersectionality along with all of its complexities (including the discussion on class). Such will be the essence of the latter part of this essay, which will provide ample theory on concepts pertaining to class, such as the various kinds of capital, as well as reveal an ideological position on the commodification of gender expression through fashion at the hands of a ruthless and unyielding capitalist system. Ultimately, what this paper strives to achieve is a deepening of the gender–class analysis, which, in this case, would be finalized in a class-driven examination of what I view as the main issue with the above-mentioned problem of the sexualization through fashion—the commodification of the gendered body.

Lastly, another aspect of the Sapienza lecture discussions that did manage to brush upon the issue of class stratification was the practice of thrifting. It was often mentioned by colleagues during their personal wardrobe presentations (to be expected of a generation that is increasingly more and more preoccupied with sustainability) due to its unique appeal of both an eco-friendly consumption approach and something that provides a sense of individuality, since vintage items are typically limited or in many cases even one of a kind. There are always, of course, the odd ones out in any setting, who in this case proved to be more conservative and rather protective of the idea of luxury fashion, even going to the extent of rebuking the practice of thrifting or buying “cheap” clothing as a whole. The overall context, however, was favorable toward vintage consumption—once again signifying a shared class standing that is not evocative of high society, yet not of the lowest classes either.

Moreover, the final ethnographic task: analyzing the behavior of fashion shoppers in various clothing stores, managed to delve even deeper into this practice by inadvertently juxtaposing the experiences of other consumers observed by us in real time. Though that was not the initial intention of my colleagues, the difference in observed behavior depending on the type of clothing store revealed a more pronounced analysis of class distinction and the way it intertwines with gender. I echoed this difference in my own report on the topic, which distinguished between customers at thrift stores, luxury shops, and fast fashion brands. The environment itself plays quite a significant role when it comes to the expression of “gendered” behaviors. Consumers of fashion seem distinctly influenced by the type of store they enter and tend to modify their behavior accordingly. Luxury stores, as also corroborated by a colleague who visited the Gucci store in Florence, tend to further reinforce and strengthen the stereotypical distinction between male and female customers due to the physical organization of the space and the very fact that the staff is typically thoroughly engaged with the customer, guiding them through the shopping experience, hence not giving them as much freedom as a non-staff-controlled environment would. The “high class” air of luxury spaces is designed at its core to repel insecure, “lower class” customers. Thus, the ones able to draw on a larger reservoir of economic capital seem to also be more conservative when it comes to binary gender norms. Fast fashion stores, conversely, provide much more freedom and see a lot more instances of men buying clothing from the women’s section and vice-versa. Their clientele tends to be working and middle class customers who are interested in following trends at a lower cost (but less concerned with issues like sustainability). Ergo, lower class consumers who bet on fast fashion are more willing to overstep gendered boundaries, yet not quite as bold as the next category of customers. In my experience and that of my colleagues, vintage stores are the most “chaotic” and free from gender stereotypes out of all types of fashion shops (in a lot of vintage

<sup>6</sup> Mohanty, C. T. (1988). “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses”. // *Feminist Review*, 30, 61–88: 62. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1395054>

places there are no distinct separate gendered sections even, and clothing is rather dispersed throughout the entire store as one big amalgamation of genderless items that anyone can browse through as they wish). Thrifting is also mostly practiced by members of the middle and lower classes, however it does sometimes attract people of higher income due to the uniqueness of each item. All of this is to say not that men and women do not follow general lines of behavior regardless of the place they are in, but rather that the environment itself facilitates various levels of adherence to gendered behavior (alternatively, we could also use the difference in environment as a recall to Goffman's performativity—I would claim that even the simple act of browsing a clothing store is a type of performance, perhaps one that happens both backstage and at the forefront simultaneously).

Of utmost significance here is how class—in our case, defined in terms of economic capital, which can generally be too reductive, as will be evidenced in the upcoming section—is interwoven with gender norms in the process of consuming fashion. After all, price is the fundamental line, the most limiting factor in fashion consumption, as stated by scholars like Caroline Foley.<sup>7</sup> The utmost decision any fashion consumer has to make is whether an item is too cheap or too expensive (both of which, ironically, are negative characteristics for the majority of people). And though class was seldom mentioned in any of my colleagues' presentations at Sapienza, its semi-conscious impact was always glaringly obvious in our exploration of gendered behavior, just beneath the surface—a surface which will be penetrated into in the next two sections of this paper.

## A Bourdieuan World

Class overshadows gender. As a matter of fact, it overshadows every other social category. That is not to say it is not a mere piece of a larger puzzle of interconnected social categories, among which are gender, religion, race, etc., but it is imperative that we also recognize class stratification as the main engine that keeps every society running and remains relatively consistent across cultures (although different cultures have varying types of social hierarchy, the idea of a higher and a lower class has been historically quite well-spread out [with varying names and terms of course]). It is also worth mentioning that class division has become even more relevant since the wake of the First Industrial Revolution, at least in western societies. The rise of an entire new social class, the bourgeoisie, has also had profound effects on the way we use dress to distinguish the various contemporary classes. What remains the status quo until today, though, is the fact that class standing itself determines much more than people might initially give it credit for.

The real-life examples are countless. Kanye West is a renowned black musician beloved by many (even after he publicly exhibited his blatant antisemitism) in a country well-known for its systemic and active racism. Alternatively, perhaps an even more convincing example would be someone “multiply-burdened”, as Crenshaw would say,<sup>8</sup> such as famous singer and performer Beyoncé. Beyoncé has been discriminated against on two accounts—her race and her gender identity. The reality is, however, that she has now risen through the ranks to such an extent that her celebrity status and her good reputation among her many fans has minimized the discrimination she receives exponentially. She is now yet another beloved musician whose class standing has transformed a lot of previously hateful people into ardent fans. All of this is to say that these so-called proverbial “burdens” (gender, race, sexuality, etc.) are much more easily overlooked when a person is in possession of a good social standing and financial prosperity. I posit that celebrities like Kanye West and Beyoncé are able to enjoy greater freedom and almost quite perfectly “fit in” with those who have never been disadvantaged on any account due to their fame and wealth. Now, of course, I anticipate the counterargument that they most likely struggled considerably more than many others in order to get to where they are in the first place. Although I do not deny that, their current status is still at the very least somewhat acquirable (though this big of a climb

---

<sup>7</sup> Foley, C. A. (1893). “Fashion”. // *The Economic Journal*, 3 (11), 458–474, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2955695>

<sup>8</sup> Crenshaw, Kimberle. (1989). “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics”. // *University of Chicago Legal Forum*. Vol. 1989, Iss. 1, Article 8: 140.

of the social ladder happens barely ever and takes incredible amounts of work and sacrifice), while something like race remains with you forever, unchangeable. Or maybe, this is precisely what capitalism wants us to believe. Both Beyoncé and Kanye West are subordinates to the dominant economic system of the west, after all. The main takeaway still stands, though— celebrities with their status are treated quite differently than the average black man and woman in the U.S., all because they have the luxury of a having a higher position in the social hierarchy.

Nevertheless, we should look into the other kinds of status, without the mention of which this section would be incomplete. Here, Bourdieu's theory on habitus and the various kinds of capital truly shines through. Though Beyoncé and Kanye West were thus far referred to as "higher status" individuals, celebrities of their caliber—popular among the masses, authors of bodies of works which are easily consumed by the lower classes and internationally widespread—are actually not the real members of the true "high class society". In order to understand what hides behind the term "high class", we would first need to recall Bourdieu's theory of practice (again, a convenient name for a kind of theory that reflects both discourse and lived experience).<sup>9</sup> Largely influenced by phenomenology, as well as by Marx, Bourdieu posited that social structures are both reproduced and molded by human practices. According to him, those practices are semi-conscious and guide our collective behavior in the group habitus (internalized history that affects both our bodies and thoughts), which then allows us to form an individual habitus. We then translate our actions to fit into certain fields, wherein there are specific power dynamics and everyone involved is aware of the notion of the "game" (involving ourselves in the power play and seeking a higher position in the field). We are all under the same illusion (*illusio*) that this game is worth playing, yet we can succeed in it only if our habitus matches the field, as well as if we have the correct kind of capital for the game.

It is here that we encounter a crucial concept—the types of capital, that is to say, the resources one can use to their advantage. Bourdieu distinguishes mainly between economic capital (finances, wealth), social capital (connections, networks), and cultural capital (anything from education to physical mannerisms, knowledge of cultural norms and history, and also including objects like clothing).<sup>10</sup> To play the game, it is important to be able to transform different forms of capital into others and also possess the relevant to the field capital as a whole (typically social). This, of course, is combined with the habitus, which indicates how well you would match the social position that you might be aiming for in the given field. Thus, newcomers to a field will try to rise through the ranks and gain favor from the already established elite—like an up-and-coming pop star trying to get Beyoncé's approval, for instance. The ones who already dominate the field, on the other hand, will do anything in their power not to be dethroned—their role in the game is to defend their status. Nevertheless, these power dynamics remain semi-conscious and field positions are constantly reformulated.<sup>11</sup>

What is more, each field can be said to have a few subfields. For the sake of this essay's argumentative power, the subfields can be briefly summarized as follows: *high culture* (small audience, but the highest status), *bohemia* (small to no audience and high status), *popular culture* (mass audience, but lower status), and *bourgeois culture* (conservative mass audience and low status). In other words, the members of bourgeois culture appreciate mass production, yet are conservative and exhibit slow changes in habits; the pop culture crowd also enjoys mass production and industrialized art (recall the two pop artists mentioned above); bohemia emphasizes art with little to no audience; and high culture represents connoisseurship, limited production, and art for art's sake. Having this in mind, we can now confidently place Beyoncé and Kanye West in the pop culture category. Although it does rank among the lower classes, these stars in particular are ranked at the very top of the power pyramid in their field and thus reap much higher rewards. They are not among the mass of consumers; rather, they are producers and hence get to accumulate economic and social capital within the music field. In stark contrast to them,

<sup>9</sup> Bourdieu, Pierre. (1986). "The Forms of Capital". // *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, edited by J. G. Richardson, Westport, CT: Greenwood, pp. 241–258.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Bourdieu, Pierre. (2020). "Haute Couture and Haute Culture". // *Fashion Theory*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition by Routledge, pp. 132–138.

however, is the real high class. The highest strata of society can be exemplified with figures like the British royal family, which is in possession of large cultural, economic, and social capital alike (a more “valuable” kind of social capital on top of that too, since their networks are other members of the highest class, unlike Kanye West’s circle of other representatives of pop culture).

In fact, fashion consumption in particular is an especially important factor for the royal family, which is incessantly scrutinized for its attire. Prince Philip, for instance, was well-known for his advocacy for sustainable fashion, being captured by the media re-wearing the same tailor-made suits from Savile Row throughout many decades, as well as collaborating with eco-conscious designers like Stella McCartney. Among the women, Catherine, Princess of Wales has also endured decades of careful scrutiny and has proven to be a proud supporter of “lower class brands” like fast fashion giant Zara. These instances may all seem like a contradiction—high culture is all about connoisseurship, is it not? And if it is about art for art’s sake, how does fast and cheap fashion fit into that narrative? French semiotician Roland Barthes can offer us a quite compelling answer to this apparent inconsistency:

The great movement within masculine dress towards standardization and democratization launched by the Revolution and inspired in form by a reference to the austerity of Quaker dress, was bringing about a whole revision of vestimentary values; seemingly *déclassé* clothing could signal social distinctions only via a new value, namely that of *distinction*; inspired by dandyism, this was the role of the *physiologies*: to teach the aristocrat how to distinguish himself from the proletariat or from the *bourgeois* by the manner in which an item, now formally undifferentiated, was worn ...”<sup>12</sup>

Despite the fact that Barthes’s examination here is directed at the contemporary man, I would argue a similar sentiment for women, as such gender distinctions do not hold up as much as one might think they do within the same class standing. Both men and women in the royal family are subjected to a never-ending panopticon of judgement from the media and the masses, though, certainly, it is fair to also admit that menswear has remained rather consistent in the past two centuries and the public itself tends to be more lenient toward men as a whole. Nevertheless, the emphasis here remains on the manner of wearing, rather than the objects themselves. Sure, Catherine’s earrings are from Zara, but they might be paired with a luxurious dress and most importantly—with her own well-established status that pulsates around her like a glowing aura of high culture wherever she goes (in the eyes of the masses). Not to mention that such consumption choices might in fact only further strengthen the royals’ reputation as upstanding citizens by highlighting their concern for the environment, as well as exhibiting a down-to-earth attitude which can only quench the ordinary person’s contempt for posh culture, thus making some of the richest and most influential people in the world even more likable.

### The Commodification of Gender: A Marxist Approach

While Barthes criticizes historical analysis’s focus on elite dress for its lack of a sociological exploration of the actual functionality of clothing (especially lower-class dress), Caroline Foley reminds us that fashion may be initiated by an influential minority, but it would not be meaningful without the imitation of the masses.<sup>13</sup> In fact, in her economic analysis of fashion, especially since the changes in quality, rapidity, and quantity from the late 19th century onward, she concludes that fashion does not simply solely trickle down from the highest classes to the lowest, but is also diffused outwards and upward. In terms of the lattermost, for instance, we could point to Balenciaga’s recent attempts at selling luxury clothing that looks concerningly disheveled, almost as if to imitate the look of a homeless person.

The consequences of the Industrial Revolution certainly do not elude Foley. The chief such consequence is the new way of thinking about the working man—not only as a producer, but also as a consumer. Hence, fashion is both created and consumed by the masses. This conclusion is rather alarming

<sup>12</sup> Barthes, Roland. (2004). *The Language of Fashion*. Andy Stafford (trans.), Andy Stafford and Michael Carter (eds.). Bloomsbury Academic: 22.

<sup>13</sup> Foley, C. A. (1893). “Fashion”. // *The Economic Journal*, 3 (11), 458–474, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2955695>

for any self-proclaimed Marxist studying fashion, as it points to the alienation of the consumer toward the purchased product (since one is also a producer, he is alienated from the products of his own labor, among which is the fashion that he later consumes). The situation becomes even more cathartic if we turn to the established Marxists: in Walter Benjamin's words, the struggle of the masses must be realized not solely through political action but also through the everyday means of the working individual, such as the various art forms, the language of which is to be translated into a political one in order to grasp the lived reality of the proletariat.<sup>14</sup> Fashion, for Benjamin, is exemplary of the relationship between the masses and the objects of pop culture (commodities): "Nothing dies; all is transformed."<sup>15</sup> It is something both internal and external, something that accumulates all of capitalism's weapons (symbolic death, reification, alienation) and is also realized as a tangible reality, giving it more power than certain abstract ideas (but fashion is able to render itself abstract as well):

As such, fashion cannot be seen as merely a choice or a style. It has natural allies. These allies are the ideas of "progress" and "taking hold of the future." Thus, fashion renders death and reification livable, while at the same time empties the present in the name of the future, teaching masses how to worship the commodity.<sup>16</sup>

Therefore, fashion has a "constitutive role"<sup>17</sup>—it indicates the future and is both purposefully clear and deceitfully manipulative for the masses. Understanding fashion, both in its idealistic and practical effects, allows the working class to become aware of certain realities about their oppression. Unfortunately, this demystification does not guarantee a way out of the capitalist status quo, as that can only be achieved through an unforeseen revolution.<sup>18</sup>

According to Benjamin, in the age of industrial mass production, the masses are alienated from themselves and the value of their experience has diminished drastically (because the lines between the natural and the technological, the comfortable and the primitive are now blurred, making the experience of the subject of history worth a hundred times less), so they turn to the "cult of stardom":

The cult of stardom, a kind of desire to become a hero in capitalism, both flattens the masses and differentiates them. Yet, this differentiation also leads to a kind of sameness. Thus, mass individuals in capitalism live enmeshed in reification.<sup>19</sup>

As a member of the Frankfurt School of Thought, Benjamin also made it clear that the focus on fashion consumption is detrimental—in a capitalist society, we increasingly see the significance of our lives more in terms of consumption rather than production, which renders consumption a means of control of the masses.

Here we may make the imperative shift toward not only the controlled, commodified fashionable body, but also the commodified gendered body:

The fact that people have come to be identified with what they consume rather than what they produce can be seen as a negative commodification of social identity, as was suggested by the Frankfurt School Marxists and some American sociologists. But because women's domestic labor was never given the same status as other forms of production, the impact of this shift on women's

<sup>14</sup> **Erdağı, Bora. (2013).** "Walter Benjamin and Political Philosophy". // *Sofia Philosophical Review*: Vol. VII, No. 2: 42.

<sup>15</sup> **Benjamin, Walter. (1999).** *The Arcades Project*; trans. Howard Eliand and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 62. The expression is from Honoré de Balzac's *Pensées, sujets, fragments*.

<sup>16</sup> **Erdağı, Bora. (2013).** "Walter Benjamin and Political Philosophy". // *Sofia Philosophical Review*: Vol. VII, No. 2: 46.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 47.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 48.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 43.

identities is complex. Male identity and status have, until fairly recently, been defined primarily in relation to work, but women have long been associated with the more symbolic values of beauty, style, and what Pierre Bourdieu calls “physical capital.”<sup>20</sup>

Gender expression has been weaponized in different ways for men and women. While the general Marxist sentiment indeed applies most fittingly to men, it is also important that we consider the female gendered experience. Femaleness has historically been mobilized mostly in symbolic ways, as stated above, but having been denied the practice of industrial production for much longer than men, women have embodied their status as consumers even earlier and perhaps have internalized it sooner as a result.

Some second wave feminists have long argued that fashion consumption is one of the forms of enslavement of women (akin to the more general notion of consumption equal to mass control) and warned of the danger of fashion culture in terms of the union between the patriarchy and capitalism. For them, femininity was a false consciousness and real women did not equate to the glamorized stars on glossy magazine covers.<sup>21</sup>

The commodification becomes even more apparent precisely in such glamorous cases. The biggest female film stars of the 20th century—Marilyn Monroe, Greta Garbo, even the supposedly subversive ones like Marlene Dietrich—were some of the first instances of unabashed commodification of the feminine body and female fashion consumption alike. Their film costumes may disguise and deform them in ways pertaining to their roles, but ultimately, dress put them on display for the ever-so-pervasive, sexualizing male gaze (here we could also make a distinction between the gaze of men from the lower classes, which feels even more humiliating for many women who see themselves as more worthy, and that of men belonging to high culture, which is often accepted as appreciative and as something that implies the possibility of finding powerful social contacts through these men). Feminist film theory itself has postulated that the image of a woman is a construct, a result of popular culture, almost as if industrially manufactured in accordance with current aesthetic demands. The Hollywood movie stars of the last century became what they wore. They were inadvertently advertising certain fashion items both on and off set, thus becoming not just the product advertiser, but also the product itself<sup>22</sup> (note how the commodification here is coupled with the above-mentioned exclusion of women in the traditional workforce, marking them as products and never as producers, hence sparing them the suffering of classic Marxist alienation but not the blatant objectification). In other words, femininity equates to the consumption of popular fashion. These commodified women then gave way to “ordinary” women’s consumption practices, who were (and continue to be) guided by their idols’ dress, thus trickling down the means (fashion) of mass control over the feminine identity.

Men, as both producers and consumers, are effectively alienated from the fruits of their labor and increasingly disillusioned in their role as consumers. Women, having internalized their consumer status sooner, often become glamorized commodities and endure both objectification and reification at once. The gendered consumer experience as a whole becomes a dignified web of commodification that is used to strengthen the means of population control. All at the hands of the one supreme contemporary class to rule them all—the capitalists.

## Conclusion

Rather than a simple and predictable summary of arguments, this conclusion is set to provide a more sobering end to all mentioned class musings. Though capitalist class division has successfully militarized gendered fashion consumer experiences as a part of its arsenal to maintain order over the working class (and the capitalist system is quite transparent about its means), it is vital that we do not

---

<sup>20</sup> **Berry, Sarah. (2000).** Screen Style: Fashion and Femininity in 1930s Hollywood. // *Commerce and Mass Culture*. Vol. 2. University of Minnesota Press: 13.

<sup>21</sup> **Gaines, Jane. (1990).** Fabrications: Costume and the Female Body. Herzog, Charlotte (eds). New York: Routledge.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

let it divert our forces onto each other. Any self-respecting predatory economic system of such a caliber knows how to cause division amidst the ranks of its own subordinates. For that reason, the emphasis here should not be on the differences between the *types* of gendered experience, reductive oppositions like men vs. women, but on the shared commodification and alienation of all those oppressed. To turn on the members of a different gender, like some extremist feminists still insist on doing even today (as well as some angry men), or to single out capitalists as a dominant class would be two unsuccessful ways of throwing the system off its course. That is to say, the real target to dismantle should not be the prosperous classes, nor the more advantaged gender, nor the privileged race or the most-widespread religion—the target should always be the system to which all fall victim, privileged or not. Or, perhaps these are just the ramblings of an invigorated youth and their attempt at consolidating gender discourse and the felt consequences of the inevitably dominating class structure.

## REFERENCES

- Barthes 2004:** Barthes, Roland. *The Language of Fashion*. Andy Stafford (trans.), Andy Stafford and Michael Carter (eds.). London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Berry 2000:** Berry, Sarah. *Screen Style: Fashion and Femininity in 1930s Hollywood. Commerce and Mass Culture: Vol. 2*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.
- Bourdieu 1986:** Bourdieu, Pierre. *The Forms of Capital*. // *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. J. G. Richardson. Westport, CT: Greenwood, pp. 241–258.
- Bourdieu 2020:** Bourdieu, Pierre. *Haute Couture and Haute Culture*. // *Fashion Theory*, 2nd ed. by Routledge: pp. 132–38.
- Crenshaw 1989:** Crenshaw, Kimberle. *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics*. // *University of Chicago Legal Forum*. Vol. 1989, Iss. 1, Article 8.
- Erdağı 2013:** Erdağı, Bora. *Walter Benjamin and Political Philosophy*. // *Sofia Philosophical Review*: Vol. VII, No. 2.
- Foley 1893:** Foley, C. A. “Fashion”. // *The Economic Journal*, 3 (11), pp. 458–474, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2955695>
- Gaines 1990:** Gaines, Jane. *Fabrications: Costume and the Female Body*. Herzog, Charlotte (ed.). New York: Routledge.
- Garland-Thomson 2002:** Garland-Thomson, R. *Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory*. // *NWSA Journal*, 14 (3), pp. 1–32, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4316922>
- Mohanty 1988:** Mohanty, C. T. *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses*. // *Feminist Review*, 30, pp. 61–88, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1395054>
- Tseelon 2016:** Tseelon, Efrat. *Erving Goffman: Social Science as an Art of Cultural Observation*. DOI: 10.5040/9780755694785.ch-009, pp. 149–164.