

PROPOSING FASHION: THE DISCOURSE OF GLOSSY MAGAZINES

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ABSTRACT

This essay discusses the production and discourse of fashion magazines, or glossies, which are an integral part of the 'fashion system'. As intermediaries between producers and consuming public, the glossies' main purpose is to propose: to make proposals about what in particular makes the latest clothes 'fashion'; about what the latest trends are likely to be; about the importance of the names behind them; about reasons why fashion should be important in readers' lives; and about where the clothes themselves may be purchased. Such proposals legitimize fashion and the fashion world in cultural — and commercial — terms. The glossies make meaningful connections between things that seem to be essentially independent; they give them social lives by creating an imaginary world about them; and they provide historical and aesthetic order in a world whose products, by their very seasonality and potentially chaotic quantity, are likely to go unnoticed. Fashion magazines represent the fashions shown in the catwalk collections. In so doing, they create 'a discourse of fashion' whose key evaluative terms are used by different people across time and space to mark out and contest semantic territory in which local cultural preferences engage with globalizing norms of fashion taste. The essay published in this issue is adapted from a chapter of a book manuscript that he is now completing, called *Glossy Galaxy: A Fashionista's Guide*.

KEYWORDS

Fashion System, Fashion Magazines, Evaluative Language, Fashion Taste, Japan

1. SUIT YOURSELF

First look at spring,¹ *Fashion's hottest summer shade*,² *Autumn's key look*,³ and *Your style this winter*⁴ — the glossies' headlines take you effortlessly through nature's and the fashion industry's seasons, with their 'best buys', 'new looks', and 'must haves'. They introduce you to adventurous lingerie, asymmetric T-shirts, breezy blouses, care-worn jeans, classic le smoking, dazzling eveningwear, demure shifts, distressed dresses, elegant jackets, girl-ish skirts, graceful gowns, intricate bodices, luxurious coats, mannish trousers, racy shorts, sassy suits, sculptural tops, simple smocks, slinky jerseys, sophisticated body suits, and a tailored tux. These are made from diaphanous, feel-good fabrics such as crumpled cotton, delicate lace, frivolous chiffon, funky denim, rich velvets, sexy suede, skimpy silk, sleek satin, soft knits, and textured linen, all of which contribute to the detail: antique-style trimmings, bold collars, dainty smocking, delicate folds, dramatic sleeves, elaborate ruffles, flamboyant

¹ *Vogue* USA, February 1991.

² *Elle* UK, June 2000.

³ *Vogue* UK, October 2000.

⁴ *Marie Claire* France, September 1997.

gatherings, groovy swirls, refined embroidery, ruffled tops, serious straps, soft flounces, and strategic zips. To these are added over-the-top or low-key accessories, including feminine trinkets, funky bracelets, graphic pussy-cat bows, no-nonsense belts, pretty stilettos, prim sandals, statement bags, and seductive shoes.⁵ The glossies tell you where to get hold of the 5 spring must-haves, 12 perfect summer looks, 36 styles you'll love, 49 wanna-buy-now swim-suits, 50 best autumn shoes and handbags, 52 page dictionary of Paris brands, 88 summer items, 96 mid-winter fashion finds, 100 best buys, 101 bargains, 105 casual looks you'll wear anywhere, 120 pages of hot trends, 138 figure-fixers, 200 new looks, 275 objects of desire, 394 smart ways to look sexy, and 498 fashion best buys. You may be able to count on anything in order to be in fashion, but somewhere, surely, there's 'a fine line between looking glamorous and looking like a Womble'.⁶ So where do you draw that line, when 'the essence of fashion lies in a process of change' (Blumer, 1969: 278)? If 'fashion' means to 'be in fashion' (Blumer, 1969: 280) then all you can do is suit yourself and hope for the best.

Each fashion season presents women who read the glossies with a cyclical dilemma. What should they wear that will carry them seamlessly from day to night, dressing up or dressing down according to time, place and occasion (what the Japanese like to call 'TPO'), as the weather warms up or cools down:⁷ *Suit of the season: seven days, seven ways*;⁸ *Evening Essentials; Workwear now*; and *It's time to party so Make the new looks work for you*.⁹ How to make that effortless transition 'from cool and classic to colorful city chic' as you update your wardrobe, accentuate your assets, and maximize your look. The glossies may reassure you that you can 'cherry pick a personal style', 'picking up on an idea here and an item there, rather than buying into a look wholesale',¹⁰ but they will also advise you what the ten 'key looks' of spring or autumn are, as well as 'what's in, what's out', to help you toe the seasonal line. Hello tailored pantsuit, conical heel pump and blouson dress. Goodbye loose cropped suit, platform pump, and shift dress. And if you wonder at the speed with which you exchange such greetings with your clothes, there's always a helpful hint to cope with the seeming arbitrariness of such change. The glossies advise you that each item has its purpose. The blouson dress hides hips and flattens the tummy; the pantsuit jacket disguises a full bust and gives the appearance of a slim figure, while the slit ankles on pants hide the bust by drawing the eyes to shapely legs.¹¹ As for pumps — those originally low shoes without fasteners that first came into fashion back in 1555 — maybe the sound they give off as you walk echoes that of an 'apparatus for forcing liquid or air'. Anyway, the airs that you don this season should come on a platform not a cone.

⁵ *All Vogue UK*, autumn 2001.

⁶ *Elle UK*, October 2001.

⁷ *Vogue UK*, May 2001.

⁸ *Marie Claire USA*, October 1997.

⁹ *Marie Claire USA*, January, February and March 2001.

¹⁰ *Elle UK*, January 2001.

¹¹ *Marie Claire USA*, March 2001. Clothing items are multifunctional when it comes to what they can do for different parts of a woman's body. *Marie Claire USA* (February 2001) advises its reader that a blouson jacket conceals a small bust; long jackets disguise a big butt; vertical lines flatter all silhouettes. With the latest lingerie, you can slenderise your body, firm up your thighs, downplay curves, flatten stomach bulges, create cleavage and disguise your flaws. Trenchant advice for those in the trenches.

2. SKIRTING ISSUES

The glossies, and other elements of the fashion press, are an integral part of what Fred Davis has called the ‘fashion system’ — ‘more or less established practices of the complex of institutions (design, display, manufacture, distribution, sales, etc.) that processes fashions as they make their way from creators to consumers’ (Davis, 1992: 200). As intermediaries between producers and consuming public, the glossies’ main purpose is to *propose*: to make proposals about what in particular makes the latest clothes ‘fashion’ (‘Fashion’s new take on black is all about strong, sexy femininity’);¹² about what the latest trends are likely to be (‘Designers are working between the extremes of girlie-feminine and powerful-masculine looks’);¹³ about the importance of the names behind them (‘Tom Ford designs for seduction’,¹⁴ or ‘Slip Helmut Lang’s delicate boa around your neck’);¹⁵ about reasons why fashion should be important in readers’ lives (‘As designers, we give people reasons to dream’);¹⁶ and about where the clothes themselves may be purchased (‘boots, to order, by Sonia Rykiel, at Browns’).¹⁷ Proposals like these legitimize fashion and the fashion world in cultural — and commercial — terms (Moulin, 1987: 76).

The glossies make meaningful connections between things that seem to be essentially independent; they give them social lives by creating an imaginary world about them; they create awareness in participants of the field of fashion in which they work; and they provide historical and aesthetic order in a world whose products, by their very seasonality and potentially chaotic quantity, are likely to go unnoticed (Blumer, 1969: 290). So we find a not-immediately-obvious connection made between ‘filthy-rich catwalk babes’ who can’t get out of bed for less than £10,000 a day, ‘convocations of magazine editors’ being summoned by ministers to shoulder the blame for promoting anorexia and bulimia, and the role of ‘the family’ in contemporary society.¹⁸ Or readers are given a full depiction of the social world of a ‘must-have’ accessory like the Fendi Baguette. First ‘snapped up’ by the likes of Madonna, Gwyneth Paltrow, Liz Hurley and Catherine Zeta-Jones, then awarded ‘cult status’, 600,000 bags were sold within four years after first being shown in Fendi’s autumn/winter collection in Milan in 1997. Such vibrant sales encouraged LVMH and Prada to pay jointly \$900 million to get a 51% controlling stake in what had been an ‘off-the-radar’ luxury house for most of the 1990s.¹⁹

In ways like these, glossies help form a collective concept of what ‘fashion’ is, although at the same time — as in the world of art (Hauser, 1982: 431) — they’ll bring in such aesthetically irrelevant forces as snobbery, elitism, trendiness, and a fear of lagging

¹² *Vogue* UK, March 2001.

¹³ *Vogue* UK, February 2001.

¹⁴ *Vogue* UK, August 2001.

¹⁵ *Vogue* UK, May 2001.

¹⁶ John Galliano, quoted in *Vogue* US, December 2001.

¹⁷ *Vogue* UK, October 2000.

¹⁸ Leslie White, ‘From power suits to girl power’. *Elle* UK, October 2001, pp. 123-6.

¹⁹ *Elle* UK, October 2001.

behind the arbiters of prevailing taste in what Pierre Bourdieu (1993: 135) once called a 'dialectics of pretension and distinction'. Thus, glossies propose to their readers that 'Sofia [Coppola] is a style arbiter whose face is worth a thousand words (or probably more)'.²⁰ They suggest that they 'forget the perfect handbag. This season, the ultimate accessory is the perfect boat';²¹ that a tan is 'vital to the bare-limbed maximum exposure that makes any outfit look more nonchalant and spontaneous';²² and that 'looking like your clothes matter to you is all wrong. In fact, the more you care, the less it should show'.²³

So the production and reception of fashion are interdependent, both in terms of communication and of the organization of production and consumption. Designers need mediators and interpreters of one sort or another to ensure that their work is properly understood. The idea is that this 'proper' appreciation then translates into sales. In other words, like politics, art, or academia, fashion is marked by a struggle to enlist followers, and one task of the glossies is to convert the agnostic. The reception of fashion, then, is a product of social cooperation among those who form 'a community of faith', based on a collective belief — or misrecognition (Bourdieu, 1993: 138) — in the power of *haute couture* and *prêt-à-porter*. It is this faith that drives the fashion system.

Those working for the glossies are a bit like apostles who spread the Word, who portray and interpret designers' collections each season — proposing meanings that readers can cling to, removing all the strangeness that accompanies novelty, reconciling what at first glance may be confusing with the already familiar, and thereby creating continuity between previous, present and future trends. Their job isn't simply to appreciate new stylistic trends — often by setting up a series of oppositions between these and the previous season's styles ('After equestrian chic, a pastoral mood is breezing into fashion. Scampering animals, fluttering birds and rustling trees adorn the season's sweetest clothes and accessories')²⁴ — but to recognize new discoveries, re-evaluations, and re-interpretations of styles that have been misunderstood and/or belong to the past ('Even Alpine knits are chic in a trim tank and mini-combo',²⁵ or 'Helmut Lang softens fetish chic by colouring it in shades of cream',²⁶ and 'patent Manolo Blahnik stilettos add a kinky edge to a Chanel classic').²⁷ If designers create the form of fashion items, therefore, the glossies create their legend (Hauser, 1982: 468). In so doing, they fabricate mythical personages out of designers and the fashion houses for which they work, as well as of other members of the fashion world. This leads to a situation where collections may be

²⁰ Justine Picardy, 'Modern fashion icons.' *Vogue* UK, January 2001, p. 33.

²¹ *Vogue* UK, May 2001.

²² *Vogue* UK, June 1998.

²³ *Vogue* UK, September 2001.

²⁴ *Vogue* UK, 1991; Joanne Entwistle, *The Fashioned Body: Fashion, dress and modern social theory*. Cambridge: Polity, 2000, p. 237.

²⁵ *Vogue* UK, November 1991.

²⁶ *Vogue* UK, July 1991.

²⁷ *Vogue* UK, October 2001.

judged not by their intrinsic worth, but by the names with which they are labelled:²⁸ *Bally high, Choo polish, Hedi times, Kors célèbre, Mayle order, and Model T. Ford.*

At the same time, the public needs the glossies since they help it distinguish what's 'good' from what's 'inferior' in the apparent chaos of each season's collections in New York, London, Milan and Paris. In so doing, glossies help transform fashion as an abstract idea and aesthetic discourse into everyday dress (Entwistle, 2000: 237). Thus, when reflecting on the passing of a season, they can proclaim that 'surprisingly wearable looks leapt from the catwalk straight into women's wardrobes'.²⁹

3. GLOSSY MODE

The driving force behind the publication of the glossies is, of course, fashion itself. Each is both cultural product and commodity, and thus addresses multiple audiences, some of whom are there to show off clothes, others to buy them, and yet others to create a buzz around them. These audiences include the 'fashion village'³⁰ of designers, photographers, models, hair stylists, make-up artists, models and their agencies, and so on; and the 'fashion leadership' (Davies, 1992:146-9), consisting most notably these days of celebrities from the film, music and entertainment worlds; fashion buyers, chiefly from large department store chains (Entwistle, 2006: 704-24); and the international press, including fashion magazines, which reviews and comments on each season's collections, and brings new trends to general public attention. Still, we ordinary consumers of fashion are often furthest from the fashion village's and leadership's collective mind. As one up-and-coming designer reminded glossy readers: 'I would always rather dress pop stars than real people'.³¹ To understand fashion, then, we need to understand the interconnections between its production and consumption, between the ideals of fashion and how clothes are actually worn all over the world. It is each country's glossies that help us in this quest.

Because the glossies are so closely tied to the fashion industry, their monthly editions closely follow its seasonal calendar ('how speedily the trends flashed by in the space of two seasons'),³² and it's normal for an editor-in-chief to make use of this seasonal discourse to prepare a general outline of her magazine six months in advance. The March and September issues of most magazines³³ are devoted to the latest spring/summer and autumn/winter collections shown in London, New York, Paris and Milan. Usually, one or two trends in particular are picked out for focus in a following issue (*Frill seekers*,³⁴ or *The return of the trophy jacket*).³⁵ Each season's shows are then generally fol-

²⁸ As Bourdieu (1993: 138) acidly points out: 'if you're a fashion journalist, it is not advisable to have a sociological view of the world'.

²⁹ *Elle* UK, January 2001.

³⁰ Interview, Kazuhiro Sait, President, Nikkei Condé-Nast and Editor-in-Chief, *Vogue Nippon*, Tokyo, 21 September 2004.

³¹ *Vogue* UK, March 2001.

³² Sarah Mower, 'Vogue view: best and worst of 2001'. *Vogue* US, December 2001, p. 159.

³³ There is some seasonal adjustment in Japan because of a title's early publication date each month.

³⁴ *Vogue* UK, October 2001.

³⁵ *Vogue* USA, December 2001.

lowed by one special issue devoted to beauty, as seen in runway models' make-up and hair styling, and by another focusing on fashion accessories (in particular, handbags and shoes, which themselves may simultaneously be run as a video during the showing of a collection):³⁶ *Beauty Snip: recreating the YSL catwalk look*;³⁷ *Milan Hair style*;³⁸ *Fancy feet*,³⁹ or *Look of the moment: the romantic accessory*.⁴⁰

The remaining four issues tend to follow pre-established patterns, some of them linked to other aspects of fashion. For example, editors will make use of the ideas of love and romance associated with Valentine's Day to focus on lingerie in their February issues, or of vacation time in July or August to include swimwear specials, while the year-end gift-giving season provides them with an opportunity to fill their December issues with page after page of accessories, jewellery, and fragrances. By using seasonal trends to put across selected themes, the glossies often present related commodities as themselves constituting 'collections': from lingerie and swimsuits to watches and jewellery, by way of mobile phones and chocolates as fashion trends. The commodities featured on their pages — either as text or as advertising — themselves become 'fashion' items, subject to constant and regular cycles of change.

There is plenty of evidence in recent years to suggest that the traditional two season fashion system is giving way to more fluid, continuous production schedules attuned to consumer demands and the technological ability to supply them. Nevertheless, the spring-summer and autumn-winter seasonal distribution of clothing remains very important for the glossies. The reasons for this are clear enough. First, it imposes order on a potentially chaotic mass of clothing that needs to be shown and proposed to readers, who still tend to be more or less reassured by the fixed seasonal boundaries within which fashion changes take place. Second, as we've just seen, that very order is an essential part of the glossies' production processes since, without it, they would be obliged to put aside their current fixed annual structure of issues and devote far more time and energy to the planning of more content-varied monthly editions. This would make it difficult for a magazine title to maintain a regular monthly publication schedule on the basis of its existing personnel and financial resources. Third, the bi-seasonal distribution of clothing conveniently structures the solicitation of advertising material, and advertising, of course, forms the financial base influencing a publisher's decision to launch, maintain or cease publication of a particular title. Since the glossies are very important to the fashion world, it would seem in the long run to be counter-productive for the traditional seasonal structure of the fashion industry to be completely put aside - unless those concerned decide that they want a very different kind of medium in which to publicise their outputs.

³⁶ Many glossy magazines now have computerised templates which set story length and picture size in advance, standardise typefaces, headline sizes, picture credits and other aspects of design that make up what is known as the 'furniture' of a page (see Jenny McKay, *The Magazines Handbook*. London: Routledge, 2000, p. 122).

³⁷ *Vogue UK*, October 2000.

³⁸ *Elle Japon*, November 2002.

³⁹ *Vogue UK*, November 1991.

⁴⁰ *Vogue USA*, October 2001.

This may well be what underpins the current shift from print to electronic dissemination of fashion styles.

Textually, fashion magazines' *raison d'être* lies in the monthly 'fashion well' — somewhere between 40 and 52 full-page colour photographs of the latest designer clothes, uninterrupted by advertisements, and featuring well-known designers, photographers, and models (as well as makeup artists, hair stylists and so on, whose renown is more or less circumscribed by the fashion village). Ideally, a fashion well's photographs should be edited in such a way that the clothes shown fill between 60 and 70 per cent of the page, with background amounting to 30, at most 40, per cent. The fabric, too, should be clearly shown, although this is by no means always the case.⁴¹

The clothes themselves are lent by fashion houses, which are more or less cooperative and/or fussy, depending on the status of the magazine asking to use them in a photo shoot. Glossies use preferred fashion house names, based on advertising placed in their pages, and they ring the changes as best they can to ensure that all are represented over a season, or — failing that — a year. But what's included in a story and what's not also depends to some extent on what's popular among readers and sells well in the country in question.⁴² So the glossies propose ways in which fashion may be transformed into the kinds of clothes worn in readers' everyday lives. Without the clothes, without the images with which fashion is portrayed, and thus without the magazines themselves, there would be no 'fashion system' as such. It's the glossies that bring together producer and consumer, supply and demand, by means of a host of intermediary figures.

4. FLAMBOYANT GATHERINGS AND CLASSIC MATCH

How does it all start, this series of cyclical processes surrounding glamour and the universe of meanings attached to clothes, accessories, beauty, and hair? Of course, precisely because the glossy galaxy has been spinning around for centuries now, there's nowhere precisely we can stick a pin and say 'the race starts here'. Every new 'fashion' emerges into public space when designers from all over the world introduce their catwalk collections. But before that there's the preparation, revolving around two processes in particular: developments in the fabrics and textile industry, on the one hand; and, on the other, current and recent fashion styles which, together with recent happenings in the worlds of art, literature, politics, and other aspects of modernity, are likely to affect changes in the immediate future.

The fashion show and the fashion press have long been rivals over which produces the images that define fashion. Together they form a classic match. For fashion houses, the defining images lie in the shows they put on in order to sell their collections of clothing every season and to produce the items of dress that will be selected by fashion

⁴¹ Interview, Misao It , Editor-in-Chief, *Harper's Bazaar Japan*, Tokyo, 19 November, 2002. Cf. Patrik Aspers, *Markets in Fashion: A phenomenological approach*. Stockholm: City University Press, 2001, p. 7.

⁴² Interview, Mitsuko Watanabe, Fashion Features Director, *Vogue Nippon*, Tokyo, 21 September, 2004.

editors, forecasters, and buyers, before being promoted as trends (Crane, 2000: 165). For their part, the glossies broker these catwalk images, while adding many more studio and location photographs, and so act as a kind of cultural intermediary between sellers, buyers, and onlookers. The tension between these two image-creating institutions in the fashion system leads to a kind of creative alliance that has allowed fashion images to grow all the more powerful in contemporary society.

A fashion show is a biannual presentation of a new clothing collection on moving bodies for an audience.⁴³ But who is that audience precisely? Is it the celebrities and other glitterati from the entertainment world who jostle in a 'politics of seating'⁴⁴ for front-row places beside the raised dais on which the models provide the *défilé*? Or is it the crowd of photographers who set up their equipment at the end of the catwalk, where models pause to adopt the right '*sprezzatura*' or casual pose? Or the department store and other retail buyers who sit out of the celebrity limelight in the second row of seats? Or the glossies' publishers and editors who come from around the world just to witness 15 minutes of sartorial spectacle? Or other fashion industry representatives, sponsors and partners? Or is it, somehow, all of them together in a series of flamboyant gatherings? It's not only the glossies that have a multiple audience (Moeran, 2014).

Before the beginning of the current millennium, a fashion show was the first public presentation of a designer's clothes and took place approximately six months before the collection was due to reach retail outlets and the street. The responses of the buyers, and to a lesser extent the fashion press, determined how many of each style of clothes were ordered, made and, hopefully, sold. The fashion show, therefore, acted as a crucial form of promotion that balanced the clothing industry's twin concerns with entertainment and sales. By putting on a fashion show in the first place, a fashion house (designer or brand) could present and control an aesthetic vision or concept. By doing so at regular intervals, it could also coordinate its presentations for overseas buyers, while protecting itself against copyright infringement by means of a documented release of its goods.

These relationships between fashion houses and buyers, more or less formalised by the system of biannual sales, have now been transformed by fast fashion. Pioneered by Biba and glorified by Zara, fast fashion is based on the principle of continuous replenishment, which has itself led to the near-continuous development of collections and, as a result, to more informal collaborative relations between fashion houses and buyers (Skov, 2006: 764-83). In other words, the fashion industry no longer marks its calendar according to biannual sales presentations, because a fashion brand's buyers and business partners are already familiar with what's in the pipeline from visits to the showroom and advance planning. As a result, the fashion show today is less of a sales, and more of

⁴³ Lise Skov, Else Skjold, Brian Moeran, Frederik Larsen, and Fabian Csaba, 'The fashion show as an art form.' © *reative Encounters Working Paper*, Copenhagen Business School, 2009. Many of the points made in this section are based on this working paper and I am grateful to my co-authors for permission to reprint them here.

⁴⁴ Dorinne Kondo, *About Face: Performing race in fashion and theatre*. New York: Routledge, 1997. Through acts of exclusion, inclusion and seating arrangements, every designer and his team make statements about the positions of all the actors at a show. An authoritative fashion commentator, for example, may be relegated to lesser seats, or even excluded from a show, in a vendetta for poor coverage of the previous show.

a ritual and social, event; less of a risky launching of clothes and more of a party for those who make, distribute, buy and sell those clothes.

As a ritual event, or ‘tournament of values’ (Moeran, 2010; Moeran and Pedersen, 2011), the fashion show is clearly set off from the outside world in terms of its timing and location. First, it takes place during the demarcated period of a ‘fashion week’, suggesting that fashion can only happen during these periods and at no other time. Second, it tends to be held in untoward places that normally have other purposes than that of showing fashion collections: exhibition halls, warehouses, theatres, museums, and marquee tents. The fact that they are usually enclosed without windows means that shows take place in an atmosphere that is often neutral and anonymous. This is intentional. It allows total control of the staging of each collection.

This demarcated space is itself divided between ‘front stage’, where a collection is appreciated and consumed by the audience; and ‘back’ stage, where it is pieced together and made ready by the designer concerned, together with his or her team. While the front stage is carefully scripted in its staged framing devices, both in time and place, in order to exclude all possibility of unscripted behaviour and individual improvisation in performance of the tournament ritual (although accidents can and do happen), the back stage consists of ordered chaos — order in the arrangement of clothes, enabling models to hurriedly dress, undress, and dress again; but chaos in the sheer number of different kinds of personnel present, and the multiplicity of tasks that they have to carry out, if the front stage performance is to take place.

The fashion show, then, consists of two performances, each encased in the other. One is the parade of clothes on the catwalk, planned and scripted to the last detail of model’s pose and turn. The other is the performance put on by members of the audience, whose behaviour is scripted in sociological terms as they observe and are observed as part of the spectacle (Fairchild, 1989: 22-9). In this respect, the drama of a fashion show comes from a ‘double antagonism’ (Hauser, 1982: 495): the first between the various participants (designer, producer, models, stylists, and so on); the second between those producing and those witnessing the performance.

As a tournament of values, the fashion show, like the glossies themselves, serves to define the fashion industry as a *community* (or ‘village’). This it does in terms of production (fashion world personnel, as well as fashion students), distribution (buyers), reproduction (fashion press photographers and journalists), *and* consumption (celebrities). It highlights questions of membership of that community (who is allowed in and who turned away by a show’s gatekeepers); manages interpersonal relationships among participants (both in audience seating arrangements and in back stage practices); and regulates their overall behaviour (including in-group behaviour and dress codes (Smith, 1989: 51):

5. TOP HAT AND TALES

Once the top hats and all the other clothing items of a fashion collection have been shown, the glossies come in with their tales of who did what, with what effect, and how it all fits in with people’s lives. Their main task is to transform the fashion collections into a

'fashion well' — somewhere between 42 and 50 pages of fashion photographs that form the heart of each issue (or 'the book') of *Vogue*, *Elle*, *Marie Claire* and *Harper's Bazaar*. Uninterrupted by ads, the fashion well is almost invariably placed about two thirds of the way through an issue of a European or American magazine. This means you have to wade through a lot of other stuff to get to a fashion magazine's essence (although Japanese editors are more considerate of their readers and place the fashion well earlier on in an issue). Here can be found the images that illustrate the ultimate dress, the dainty shoes, the super-sexy top, grungy rock-chick trousers, and neat white knickers seen in the collections and now brought together in a variety of collages: workmanlike fabrics, denim couture, funky trainers, and low-key accessories in *Workwear now*;⁴⁵ or subtle khaki, bronze leather, brocade pumps, lingerie-inspired tops, understated cardigan, and lamé tops and skirts in *Strike it rich*.⁴⁶

With titles like *Hot metal* ('This season create a shimmering look with precious metals of gold, pewter, copper and bronze'), *Emerald dreams* ('Unexpected fabric mixes are making news'), *Working girl* ('The suit makes a comeback'), *White magic* ('Warm up in cool shades of white or cream sheepskin, velvet and knits'), and *Touch chic* ('Take to the streets in 80s inspired spike heels and figure-hugging leather or Lycra. Look but don't touch'), each story usually consists of between eight and twelve (occasionally more or fewer) pages and is designed to illustrate an overarching fashion theme (*Winter warmers*).⁴⁷

Every fashion well has its own selection of tales to tell — some more, some less, narrative in style. Take a standard spring/summer fashion issue, for example. Its three stories are *Military time* ('Capture spring's latest trend in khaki and olive: the details are epaulets, pockets, and belts'); *Runway or realway* ('Choose from head-to-toe designer looks or maximize your wardrobe with one key piece'); and *Reality fashion* ('From classic to modern, how the newest designer looks are inspired by today's lifestyles'). Just how well such titles are matched by visual images, however, can be a bit of a hit-and-miss affair. *Military time* makes use of army equipment (a Desert Hawk helicopter in one photo, dusty Jeep in another), personnel (surrounding the model in camouflage fatigues, or full battle gear), and other obviously 'military' signs (a wooden barrack hut) when posing its model in front of the camera. *Reality fashion*, too, gets out and about in the real world (admittedly only of New York) as its models pose in Bloomingdale's department store, the offices of the *New York Post*, a plastic surgery office, supermarket, coffee shop, high school, and UPS delivery centre. *Runway or realway*, however, is reduced to studio shots without any background to illustrate the story's advertised theme.⁴⁸

Mitsuko Watanabe, Fashion Features Director of *Vogue Nippon* at the time we met, was nominally in charge of everything to do with fashion pages outside the fashion well. Her job was to ensure an overall balance in each issue; to create pages that stopped readers in their tracks and got them to buy the magazine in the bookstores.

⁴⁵ *Marie Claire* USA, February 2001.

⁴⁶ *Elle* USA, March 2002.

⁴⁷ All in UK *Elle*, November 1997.

⁴⁸ *Marie Claire* USA, March 2001.

“The fashion well is really the dream part of a magazine,” she started, “And it’s the most crucial part of *Vogue*. That’s why so many of us are involved. The word for ‘well’ in Japanese is *ido* and this implies a bubbling up of water from great depths. That’s exactly what the fashion well has to be every month. Because Tokyo’s a long, long way from the centre of the fashion world, we commission a foreign editor to do most of our stories. Each issue of *Vogue Nippon* is built around a particular theme — like next month’s issue which we’ve called *Sweet & Sexy*. These themes are decided more or less after all the shows have finished each season. We all of us attend them in New York, London, Paris, and Milan, and once they’re over we all gather here in Tokyo to discuss them. That means Gabriele, our foreign fashion editor, comes — together with the booking editor, and the Vice President of Condé Nast for the Asia-Pacific region. And we sit down for two and a half days and discuss everything we’ve seen over the past four to six weeks. During our discussions, certain keywords emerge ‘romantic’, ‘men’s like’, and so on and these are then selected as overarching themes for upcoming issues. These keywords help us narrow down themes within themes, and it is these that Gabriele carries out – but always in close consultation with our Editor-in-Chief. How do we come up with these keywords? That’s a difficult question. I suppose one can say they’re based on *feeling*. And that feeling is itself based on the different kinds of materials, colours, and clothing styles we’ve seen in the collections. No, we don’t take account of trend forecasts that precede the shows. And we pay absolutely no attention to what other editions of *Vogue* may be doing. If we did that, our work would be impossible! At this meeting, too, we bandy around names of potential models who we feel would best suit the themes that we select for upcoming issues. So, we decided in the spring this year, for example, that we would have three issues featuring *sh joppoi*, young, sweet and sexy models, before moving on in November to more glamorous models. And if next season’s mood changes to sultriness, well, that’s fashion! There’s no necessary continuity, however much we may aim for it!”

Mitsuko laughed a tinkling laugh, as I commented on how different this attitude was from that of the academic scholar.

“We generally hire one photographer to work for us for six months so that we can maintain both continuity and quality in our covers. This is one reason we don’t use celebrities on our covers. They cost too much, and anyway it’s really hard to schedule photo shoots for when we want and need them. As a result, we’d have to select photos of the celebrity we want from an agency and these will invariably fail to meet our quality standards or *Vogue* style. So, we avoid them, even though it’s

now *de rigueur* for American *Vogue* to use celebrities and not models. For clothes worn by cover models, we send Gabriele a list of preferred fashion house names. This is based very much on business conducted between them and *Vogue*, as I'm sure you can imagine," Again she laughed. "And it's a very difficult balancing act. Gabriele has the final choice in selection, but once we've featured one designer a couple of times in one season, we need to ensure that we don't continue to do so the next. Gabriele works out each of the fashion stories in conjunction with the photographer she's contracted to work for her. The latter sends us the photos, usually in the order that he prefers. Some photographers insist that there be no changes; others don't mind so much. In general, we don't play around with the photos too much, because there's no particularly 'Japanese' way to view images. However, we do have an occasional problem based on the fact that Japanese magazines open from right to left, rather than vice versa, and most photographers think only in terms of a Western-style magazine. This means that we sometimes need to change the final two pages, so that a story ends with a photo that clearly marks its end. From time to time, though not so often, we also reverse the opening two-page spread. The fashion team's job is to write the copy that accompanies these photos, since no fashion editor supplies text with the images for stories that she produces. So it is we who come up with a title for the story, whose theme we then emphasise in the copy on each page. Of course, initially, when she gets in touch with us outlining her plans for the next issue, Gabriele will make use of certain keywords to explain her story angle. These usually reappear in the finished text, so that there's continuity between the conception, production and completion of each fashion story."⁴⁹

6. DRESS CODE

If there is one thing I kept coming across on my voyage from concept to product by way of the glossy images of fashion, it was the importance of language all along the way. First of all, like language, clothing and dress can be said to constitute a *code* whose key terms — fabric, texture, colour, and so on — are never stable, but always shifting in a universe of negotiated meanings, which are understood in all sorts of different ways by all sorts of different social and taste groups. As a result, the code remains in large part imprecise and implicit, rather than the opposite as in language, and depends on the contexts in which its key terms operate (Davies, 1992: 5-8). *Fashion* derives from and refers to some alteration in the code surrounding the visual conventions of dress. Without *change* there can be no fashion, although just what the nature of such change may be then becomes a matter of negotiation among those making up the fashion world and its publics (Davies, 1992: 14-15).

⁴⁹ Interview, Mitsuko Watanabe, Fashion Features Director, *Vogue Nippon*, Tokyo, 21 September 2004.

The second aspect of language that kept coming to the fore was in the way in which members of the fashion world make use of *keywords*. Forecasters, designers and magazine editors all dream up and latch onto keywords as a way of trying to get a grip on the relentlessly moving *tsunami* of fashion. Keywords produce the clothes which in turn produce the keywords that encourage the *fashionista* (fashion victim, fashion pack, couture vulture, Palm Bitch, Sloane Ranger, the ‘It’ list, and so on) to buy and wear the clothes as ‘fashion’. But keywords are open to all sorts of interpretations, and it’s precisely their semantic density that makes them so powerful (and ‘key’ words) since they allow people to think they’re agreeing on something (like ‘identity’, ‘attitude’, or ‘chic’) when, if they were to scratch below the surface of the keyword itself, they might find that they don’t (Moeran, 1984). Is there any substance, then, to this ‘language of clothes’? (Lurie, 1981)

It’s probably fair to say that, just as fashion depends upon change, so it does not – cannot – exist without language. This isn’t to say that clothing functions *like* language or that it *is* itself a language (Bogatyrev, 1976: 13-29; Maramotti, 2000: 35-37), but it does give rise to a *discourse*, even though practitioners may wish to argue that real clothing can ‘evoke responses without the mediation of words’ (Griffiths, 2000: 78). As I see it, then, the use of language more than anything else transforms clothing and dress into *fashion*. It’s language that defines what fashion is, or is not. The question is: how do the glossies propose this discourse to both producers and consumers of fashion?

I’m not the first to suggest that fashion’s meanings come about through language. Roland Barthes, for example, was fascinated by how fashion was (and, of course, still is) *described* and how clothing got ‘translated’ into language. To prove his point, he analysed the language of two French fashion magazines *Elle* and *Jardin des Modes* over a single calendar year (from June to June 1958-59) and eventually published what is occasionally described as *the* most boring book ever written about fashion (Barthes, 1967).

Under such circumstances, it probably wouldn’t be very wise of me to enter into a blow-by-blow account of how Barthes wrestled with the written language of clothing. But some of his points are worth noting. For instance, he distinguished between the representation of an evening dress in a fashion photograph (what he called *image clothing* or *vêtement-image*), the words used to describe that dress (*written-clothing* or *vêtement écrit*), and the actual dress itself (*le vêtement reel*). Although both image and written clothing should unite in the actual clothing, he argued that this didn’t happen. Instead, the three different structures of clothing (iconic, verbal, and technological) float independently of one another and allow us to shift continuously from one to the other without ever being able to grasp their totality (Barthes, 1967: 13-17).

Barthes also noted that written-clothing consists of two inter-related classes of utterance. One includes all the vestimentary features (forms, fabrics, colours, and so on) that signify different kinds of clothes; the other all evaluative (‘discreet’, ‘amusing’, and so on) and circumstantial (‘evening’, ‘weekend’, ‘shopping’, ‘party’, and so forth) features that signify the kinds of lives we lead in the world. Together these transmit, he said, the sign of *Fashion* itself. It is this ‘discourse of taste’ that I want to pursue a little further — first by looking at how language is used to describe clothing in Japan, and then by comparing it with what I found glossies published in England during the same year.

7. DESIRABLE DETAIL

A wide range of words and phrases are used in the glossies to describe in detail the clothing shown in its pages.⁵⁰ Some of these phrases are purely descriptive ('stretch turtle top', 'off-shoulder knit', 'centre-press pants', and so on); others are more evaluative (like 'sensual top', 'sharp khaki shirt', and 'feminine jacket'). It's this latter group of words and phrases that interests me because they're the ones that transform clothing into fashion, and communicate fashion tastes to people in their everyday lives.

Different fashion magazines tend to write about fashion in different ways (Barthes, 1967: 21 fn. 23). Some, like *Elle*, are largely descriptive; others — like *Figaro*, *Oggi*, and *Marie Claire* — make wider use of evaluative terms. This difference in how fashion words and phrases are used depends to some degree on the personal tastes of the (sometimes sub-contracted) fashion editor working for each magazine. This is why a title may change its tone rather suddenly, as people are redeployed from one job to another.⁵¹

Generally speaking, the discourse of fashion used in glossies all over the world expresses an editor's ability to notice and inform others that things have certain qualities: that a dress, for example, is cut in a certain way ('tight white line'); that a fabric and colour combination gives a certain 'feel' ('Tweed has got the texture, blend of colours and luxury feel'); or that an accessory adds a certain 'accent' ('metallic heels give an added sharpness'). We use such concepts of taste, or evaluative terms, to talk about a wide variety of other things we enjoy in our everyday lives — like art (Sibley, 1978): music, sports, and wine (Lehrer, 1983).

Some of these phrases we *read* about quite happily, but we can be less comfortable with them when it comes to using them in daily *conversation* (unless we're dedicated members of a fashion, art or wine world). We're unlikely to praise a friend on her 'intelligent dress', for example, or refer to its 'spicy monotone' when commenting on its colour. Some words do a kind of double-duty, even in everyday conversation, where we may use them in both descriptive and evaluative ways — 'cool', 'loud', 'rich', 'sharp', and 'tight', for instance. Other words, whether written or spoken, function only or primarily as evaluative terms in both fashion and everyday discourses ('chic', 'elegant', 'feminine', 'glamorous', 'lovely', 'sweet', and 'vivid'). Yet others are rarely, if ever, used as evaluative terms at all. It's unlikely that even the most flowery of magazine editors or critics will use such words as 'clammy', 'noisy', 'freezing', or 'blunt' when discussing fashion and clothes.⁵²

Magazine editors and fashion critics adopt a number of techniques when writing about fashion.⁵³ First, they may use one evaluative word or phrase to support another. Thus, a blouse can be 'extremely simple precisely because of its orthodox form', while 'this year's

⁵⁰ The rest of this chapter is based on Brian Moeran, 'A Japanese discourse of fashion and taste', *Fashion Theory*, Volume 8, Number 1, 2004, pp. 35-62.

⁵¹ As happened with the French edition of *Marie Claire* in the late 1980s. (Personal communication, Katie Breen, former International Editor-in-Chief, Marie Claire, Paris.)

⁵² Cf. Sibley 1978, p. 65. We might note, in passing, that the discourse of fashion — unlike that of wine or various art forms — consists almost entirely of terms with positive and not negative nuances.

⁵³ The remainder of this section relies on Sibley, 1978, pp. 79-81.

white isn't just pure and beautiful, but gives off an impression of active youth'. More often, however, they'll find a way of drawing your attention to a qualitative judgement by pointing out, or merely mentioning, non-evaluative, but easily discernible, features in an item of dress. For example, 'the side, sleeve and collar zipper details are brimming with adult playfulness'. Here, they may well make use of non-evaluative words or phrases to support their application of an evaluative term (adult playfulness) that, ultimately, depends on the presence of details (side, sleeve, collar, and zipper) for which we don't need to exercise taste or sensibility. Other, similar examples include: 'a feminine softness and elegance epitomised by Grace Kelly'; 'this season, thanks to the use of natural and soft materials, the finish is even more romantic'; and 'a combination of grey on grey is marked by a subtle difference in texture'.

Second, like professional critics in all fields of what we may loosely term 'aesthetic discourse', fashion writers may simply mention the qualities they want us to see, and ignore the rest: 'high quality material that is easy to wear', or 'an ageless quality, grace and femininity'. As a result, we accept that the material being talked about *is* high quality, and easy to wear, and that a particular jacket not only displays quality, grace and femininity, but that these three characteristics are indeed 'ageless' and not season-bound. In this case, the quality of the jacket's material ends up being taken for granted. In short, it becomes 'immaterial'.

Third, fashion writers make extensive use of similes and metaphors: 'Paris fashion and the dramatic rejuvenation of haute couture'; 'a body-hugging sexy leather feel'; 'lace continues to captivate women, regardless of the season', and so on. Many words used in the vocabulary of fashion (like balanced, bold, clean, dramatic, dynamic, and so on) have come to be evaluative by some kind of metaphorical transference. In other words, even though these have now become standardised terms in the discourse of fashion, they aren't normally evaluative except in artistic and critical writing in general. We don't talk about our beer having a 'clean' taste, for example, or our neighbours' houses being 'balanced' or 'bold'. Employment of such words in the discourse of fashion, then, is now quasi-metaphorical (Sibley, 1978: 65).

Fourth, fashion writers make use of repetition or reiteration to re-enforce their views. Repetition doesn't consist wholly of using the same words (like accent, balance, cut, line, look, mood, and sense) time and time again, but also of pairing similar evaluative words where one might do (for example, 'simple and refined', 'cool and feminine', 'lean and compact'). As I'll show in a little while, repetition often leads to a clustering of evaluative words in the fashion discourse (for example, 'feminine and flirtatious', 'flirtatious and funky', 'funky and fun', and so on).

At the same time, finally, fashion writers also make use of implicit contrasts to highlight their judgements (as in, 'regardless of whether they're cool or feminine, loose-fitting coats...'). These contrasts are often made in terms of colour, material and cut, but also in the juxtaposition of clothing items and accessories. For example, 'a clear citron colour gently asserts one's personality' may be seen as contrastive, given the colour yellow's more customary association with 'vivid' and 'bright', rather than 'gentle'. Similarly 'a highly feminine soft flare silhouette made debonair by a leather jacket' contrasts two

items of clothing — a masculine ('debonair') top and feminine bottom — by alluding to the standard description of leather as a 'hard' and 'cool' material. This method of evaluating fashion also leads, through negation, to clusters of terms in the fashion vocabulary ('elegant but sharp', 'sharp but feminine', 'feminine but cool', 'cool but sexy', 'sexy but gorgeous', and so on). These we may think of as 'taste clusters'.

8. F WORDS

Is there a fit between the theory and practice of how the glossies use fashion's dress code? Do editors adhere to the formal divisions set up in the industry between silhouette, item, fabric, detail, colour and accessory? If so, how 'global' is the language of fashion? And how much continuity does it reveal between the production and consumption of fashion? Let's take a look at first Japanese, and then English, fashion magazines to find out the answers to these questions.

A preliminary list of words that I found in Japanese fashion magazines shows that the discourse of fashion consists of both Japanese and English terms, more or less equally divided.⁵⁴ This list isn't closed, of course, since the vocabulary of fashion can be — and almost invariably is — extended indefinitely with seasonal changes and new 'fashions'. In a way, this makes the lexical structure of the fashion discourse probably less stable than those of similar evaluative discourses in the fields of aesthetics or wine. After all, the fact that 'fashion' is premised upon a bi-annual seasonal change, when new elements are introduced (or old elements recycled in a bricolage manner), means that the discourse of fashion, too, is predicated upon 'novelty' and 'originality'. Even if the same words are used, they may be inflected with 'new' meanings (as in 'this year's white is pure and clean', or 'today's grunge is a softer, more wearable trend than before').

At the same time, too, unlike the vocabulary of wine, evaluative words tend not to depend on intrinsic properties of the object described. For example, in evaluating wine, a key term like *balance* expresses a chemical relationship between sugar and acid (Lehrer, 1985: 7) and so enforces a certain measure of agreement among those drinking from a particular bottle of dessert wine (which, as a sweet wine, is unlikely to be described, for instance, as 'acidic' or 'sour'). In fashion writing, however, *balance*, which is also commonly used as an evaluative term, is applied to a relation between materials (the 'softness' of wool and the 'hard' texture of leather), colours (black and white), wardrobe items (two-piece suit and matching handbag), cut (a flared skirt and body-hugging jacket), or any combination of these. As a result, it's not as clearly *anchored* semantically, which, as we've already seen, is a feature of the discourse of fashion as a whole. In this respect, Barthes was right to see written-clothing as consisting of a large number of free-floating signifiers.

If we assume that these evaluative words mean something to readers, as well as to their writers, even if they may be interpreted somewhat subjectively by those concerned, we then need to ask what the lexical structure of this list is. My analysis of phrases used to describe the fashion clothing shown in Japanese magazine pages suggests that the

⁵⁴ A full list of terms may be found in the appendix to Moeran, 2004.

discourse of fashion can be broken down into the six different but interrelated categories used by members of the fashion industry: *silhouette*, *item*, *fabric*, *detail*, *colour* and *accessory*. At the same time, though, we can add three more overall evaluative categories to them: *taste*, *look*, and *season*.

Each of these categories includes an overarching concept: for silhouette it is the *body*; for item, *wardrobe*; for detail, *technique* (*gijutsu* in Japanese); for colour, *coordination*; for fabric, *texture*; for accessory, *accent*; for taste, *sense* (also *kankaku*); for look, *style* (predicated on *balance* and *coordination*); and for season, *mode* (or fashion itself). Around these categories and concepts we find clusters of words, ranging from *basic* to *luxurious* with different items of clothing, and from *classical* to *spicy* with fabrics, by way of looks that can range from *glamorous* to *stoic*. All categories, with the exception of season, contain between two and five dozen evaluative adjectives each (season has only a dozen).

And how pervasive are these words? How many can we find across a majority of categories? Most are multi-dimensional — in particular those stating, or having something to do with, femininity and elegance. Some, though, are clearly of more limited application. *Silhouette*, for example, makes use of words like *compact*, *flowing*, *lean*, and *slim* that aren't found elsewhere. *Colour*, too, boasts *akarui* (light), *azayaka* (bright), *hot*, *ochitsuita* (relaxed), and *pure* that aren't found in any of the other categories. All in all, though, I found 23 words repeated across five or more of the nine categories: *adult* (*otonappoi*), *chic*, *classic*, *cool*, *cute*, *elegant*, *feminine* (and its Japanese equivalent *onnarashii*), *fresh*, *gorgeous*, *hard*, *luxurious*, *mannish*, *modern*, *nostalgic*, *rich*, *sexy*, *sharp*, *simple*, *sophisticated*, *spicy*, *stylish*, *sweet* and 'this year-like' (*kotoshi-rashii*). These made up Japanese fashion's core keywords in the glossies' discourse of taste in 2001. But how coherent is this discourse, both in terms of the continuum that I've tried to trace in this chapter between production and consumption, and *vis-à-vis* other fashion discourses taking place in the glossies published in other parts of the world?

One guide to answering the first half of this question is fashion forecasting. It was reassuring to find out, therefore, that a forecast magazine published by the Japanese fashion industry six months earlier in large part anticipated the keywords I found in Japanese glossies once each season hit the streets of Tokyo, Osaka, Kyoto and the rest of Japan.⁵⁵ All the same, there were also enough exceptions to make me question the existence of absolute continuity up and down within the industry between production and consumption.

Fashion Color gives six-monthly suggestions of what those in the industry might expect to come in the following season: in terms of silhouettes, details, fabrics, and accessories, as well as colours. It focuses on each season's 'image roots' and 'keywords' before providing visual details of what the new 'looks' are likely to look like. Although some of the keywords proclaimed for each season (*fantastic* and *customized*, for example) do not appear in my own reading of Japanese glossies six months later, as I said, most of them do. I came across phrases like *sexy v-zone*, *cute mini*, and *sharp katachi* (form) under silhouette, for example, and *vivid green*, *feminine pastel*, and *azayaka orange* under colour. Other common phrases included *chic pattern*, *simple detail*, and *elegant style*.

⁵⁵ FC, 'Trend check note: Spring 2001', *Fashion Color Volume 70*, 2000, pp. 6-7; and FC, 'Trend check note: Summer 2001', *Fashion Color Volume 71*, 2001, pp. 6-7.

So it seems that fashion forecasters do get quite a lot right in their overall use of language, even though they're using little more than their intuition to make informed guesses about what's going to happen next season. Their so-called 'image roots', however, occupy a more ambivalent position in fashion clothing's flow from forecasting through production to consumption. While the military and safari looks forecast for the summer of 2001 were, indeed, all over the pages of Japanese fashion magazines throughout that season, and while references were also made to 50-60s couture and 80s fashion picked out by the forecasters, their references to the entertainment world — Madonna, Punk fashion, and 60s-70s Arts — were almost totally absent when the season actually came around, as was their prediction of renewed interest in a 'Jacqueline Kennedy style'.

Perhaps this isn't surprising. After all, Japanese have tended to be concerned more with their own contemporary arts or modern (primarily, Impressionist) European arts, than with 60s and 70s American art movements. Punk music never really took off in Japan (and only marginally existed as a watered-down fashion style), and the wife of a post-war American president and Greek shipowner has not been relevant to post-war Japanese society. Why these should have been forecast as 'image roots' for seasonal fashion trends in *Japan*, therefore, remains a bit of an enigma.

A second guide to answering the question about the coherence of the fashion discourse is to talk to consumers. How much meaning should they/we, as *consumers*, read into fashion magazine writing? Can we consign such phrases as 'elegant one-piece', 'must-have accessory', and 'touch of naughtiness' simply to fashion editors' virtuosity and penchant for verbal display, as Adrienne Lehrer first imagined when listening to discussions about wines at dinner parties with friends and acquaintances (Lehrer, 1985: 3), and as Roland Barthes implied in his analysis of the language of fashion?

My research suggests that most Japanese readers claim to pay very little attention to the discourse of taste found in their fashion magazines. Their concerns are with price, first and foremost; and to some extent with brands (although not as much as they were a decade or two ago). They also want to know where they can buy what they see in their magazines' fashion pages in order to call up recommended stores to check whether a particular item is, or is not, in stock. But they said that they rarely, if ever, read the flowery language that some magazines include with their fashion photographs, and some tended to laugh at the idea of fashion writers dreaming up so many evaluative terms whose meanings were quite beyond them (*wake ga wakaranai*).⁵⁶

My interviews with readers in Japan (and Hong Kong) support findings based on research in Europe and the USA. Japanese women don't necessarily adopt the *whole* of a particular style, although they will certainly go for some aspects of it (Kaiser et al 1991: 165-185). Younger women, though, seem to be less adventurous and less critical in this respect than older women (Crane, 2000: 208), since they haven't yet developed the self-confidence necessary to wear their own individual style. Japanese glossy readers certainly use their magazines to buy the goods proffered in their pages, but they do so

⁵⁶ This reaction echoes that of Diana Crane's American informants who rarely saw fashion editors as 'authorities on fashion' (Crane 2000: 214).

more because of the images they *see* there. A lot of women regard fashion photographs as offering a kind of visual entertainment (Crane, 2000: 212), and are highly suspicious of their accompanying F words.

9. KEY LOOKS

What about other parts of the world, though? How coherent, how global, is the discourse of fashion? Clearly, what works culturally for fashion forecasting and consumers in Japan doesn't necessarily follow the same pattern in other parts of the world, and vice versa. Jackie Kennedy (or Jackie Onassis) references, for example, were clearly in evidence in American and British fashion magazines during 2001, even though not in Japan. The American edition of *Marie Claire's* October issue carried a fashion story titled *O Jackie*, while, in the same month, *Elle* carried this caption to a photograph: 'Chanel's princess coat is just what Jackie O. would have worn, but with a modern slant'.⁵⁷ Still in October – although in fact the Jackie Kennedy image was forecast for the *spring* of that year⁵⁸ – the British edition of *Marie Claire* wrote: 'Designers have given classic 1960s couture — think Jackie O. — a sexy 21st century update for a look that shows you're in control'.⁵⁹

More interesting, perhaps, would be a comparison of all the F words found in Japanese glossies with those used in fashion magazines published elsewhere in the world. So I carried out the same kind of analysis of the words and phrases used in British glossies (mainly *Vogue*) for 2001 to see how well they did or did not compare with my Japanese material. This would tell us something about fashion's key looks globally.

So what did I learn? In both the UK and Japan, the discourse of fashion plays primarily on images that emphasize seductive femininity and gender bending, on the one hand, and street cool and high-style glamour, on the other. Motifs, trinkets, designs, fabrics, tops, necklaces, dresses are all seen to be *feminine* — sometimes *flirtatiously* so, at other times merely in a *romantic* way — unless they're suddenly *masculine*, *mannish*, *dandy*, *tomboy*, or *military*, with their tailored pinstripe jackets, classic uniforms, sharp black tailoring, elegant trouser suits, and sleek silhouettes. Collections, clothes, and accessories, with their looks, shapes, seasons, and effects, all add up to 'a brave, wild, sexy season' — with plunging necklines, feel-good fabrics, evening numbers, and demure shifts. *Sweet sexy*, *soft and sexy*, and *strong and sexy* simultaneously contrast with *streetwise*, *low-key*, *ultra girly*, and *nonchalant cool*. This is how fashion shifts its moods back and forth between what British *Vogue* calls 'touchy-feely soft' and 'don't-mess-with-me hard'.⁶⁰

The sheer comprehensiveness of this shared vocabulary suggests that the fashion industry, with the help of fashion magazines, has indeed managed to manufacture a global discourse that can be used to encourage consumption: *summer's newest look*, *classic silhouettes with sexy details*, *rich leathers call for daring accessories*, *dramatic yet easy*

⁵⁷ *Elle* USA, September 2001, 'Stylebeat', p. 266.

⁵⁸ FC, 2000.

⁵⁹ *Marie Claire* UK, October 2001, 'Smart Money', p. 260.

⁶⁰ *Vogue* UK, September 2001.

shapes, luxurious fabric, powerful look, lean silhouette, girlie style and so on and so forth. Moreover, British glossies, like Japanese fashion magazines, also made use of lots of evaluative adjectives that were distributed over the nine categories that I mentioned earlier: accessory, colour, detail, fabric, item, look, season, silhouette, and taste. A slightly fewer number of them (20, not 23) were to be found in a majority of these categories. However, only eleven of them were common to the words found in Japanese glossies. This suggests that fashion isn't as all-embracing or hegemonic as some might think. It's not just its images that are subject to a variety of interpretations. Its language, too, is multi-dimensional (Crane, 2000: 207).

Both Japanese and British magazines liked to talk about *chic, classic, cool, elegant, feminine, fresh, hard, luxurious, sexy, simple, and sophisticated*. We might say, then, that these words are part of a 'global' discourse of taste in fashion (provided that we can also find them in 2001 issues of glossies published in other parts of Europe, the USA, south America, and — probably problematically — east and south-east Asia). But whereas Japanese were concerned with *adult (otonappoi), cute, gorgeous, mannish, modern, nostalgic, rich, sharp, spicy, stylish, sweet* and 'this year-like' (*kotoshi-rashii*), the Brits focused more on *dramatic, flirtatious, girlie, pretty, seductive, sensual, soft, tough, and vintage*.

Now, one or two of these words might be seen as cultural variations on the same idea — *pretty* or *girlie*, for example, as opposed to *cute*; others (*sensual, seductive* and *flirtatious*) are clearly not. What's clear first of all, then, is that there are obvious *linguistic* differences to be accounted for. Japanese fashion discourse, for example, tends not to use too many of the endless superlatives (*chicest, hottest, most-wanted, ultra-feminine*) that characterise English-language magazines. Nor does it make use of the latter's predilection for clichéd puns as fashion story titles (*Following suit, Check Mate, Take a Bow, Cover Story*).⁶¹

Secondly, there are different *cultural emphases*. This is most obvious in Japanese fashion writing's avoidance of Christian metaphors like *angelic, divine* or *goddess*. But it can also be found in the way in which certain key terms form taste clusters. For example, Japanese fashion writing presents an image of sexiness that is *feminine* (and *onnarashii*), *chic, elegant, fresh* and *simple*, whereas British magazines focus on 'attitude' and a sexiness that is *severe, strict, and tough*, while American magazines' 'statements' of sexuality emphasise the *flirtatious, flirty, racy, raunchy, seductive, slinky, and wild*. In other words, a single key evaluative term has multiple applications in different cultural regions of the fashion globe. Moreover, central keywords in taste clusters can vary. If fashion equals *glamour* in the United States and Britain,⁶² in Japan it equals *elegance*.⁶³

Evaluative terms are also subject to multiple interpretations *within* a single cultural region, *and* between different fashion brands — witness Tom Ford's comment that 'The

⁶¹ This is slightly surprising since punning is a central element in Japanese humour.

⁶² Réka Buckley and Stephen Gundle, 'Fashion and glamour'. In N. White and I. Griffith (eds.) *The Fashion Business: Theory, practice, image*. Oxford: Berg, 2000, pp. 37-54.

⁶³ This is not, however, so far as I can judge, 'the bondage of elegance' criticised by Simone de Beauvoir. (In Elisabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams*. London: Virago, 1987, p. 125.)

Yves Saint Laurent Rive Gauche woman has a more complicated, intelligent sexiness than the Gucci woman'.⁶⁴ Thus, the meaning of *each* of the one hundred or so evaluative terms isolated in Japanese fashion writing, and for the most part recurring in other fashion discourses, depends on who uses it, to and about whom, and in what context. In other words, there are different *social emphases* to be taken into account in any analysis of the global nature of the discourse of fashion.

10. PARED-DOWN AESTHETIC

This point brings me full circle back to my departure point from the work of Roland Barthes and the role of cultural signifieds in written clothing. I've given a detailed outline and analysis of the structure of written clothing, which I've called a 'discourse of taste', and suggested that, contrary to Barthes's own opinion, fashion language is clearly associated with 'aesthetic' norms of taste. My analysis has suggested that there are key evaluative terms that constitute the discourse of fashion, and that these key concepts interact both with one another within a single field and across different evaluative fields (such as art and aesthetics, sports, music, and wine).

But what role do these key concepts play in these discourses? As I mentioned earlier, the reason why evaluative terms become *keywords* in the first place is because they are imbued with multiple condensed meanings, while at the same time being lexically and syntactically predictable. Regular readers of fashion magazines *know* that satin is likely to be *sleek*, lace *sexy*, floral prints *romantic*, bright colours *hot*, fur *rich* or *luxurious*, a black dress *simple*, a style *elegant*, and so on. In this respect, keywords found in the discourse of fashion form a 'restricted' code (Bernstein, 1971: 118-37). People in and around the fashion world use them freely as a means of displaying their membership of that world, on the one hand, and their exclusiveness vis-à-vis outsiders, on the other. They may even think that, as a result, they agree on the 'meaning' of a particular keyword.

This, though, is an illusion — on at least two counts. In the first place, different people occupying different roles within the fashion world tend to talk about clothes in slightly different ways. A cutter, for example, will adopt a much more technical viewpoint towards the detail of a dress than a fashion critic or buyer. In this way, the discourse of fashion comes to be infused with slightly different meanings. Secondly, as I pointed out earlier, the fashion world is — formally, at least — structured around two annual seasons, each of which introduces elements of change in what is offered for consumption. Here fashion keywords are a crucial element linking the old and the new because, like all key verbal concepts, they 'signify sufficient conceptual ambivalence that they can accommodate change' (Parkin, 1978: 305). This is why, in a single season, we come across phrases like *This year's chic*, as well as competing variations of a single keyword: *savage chic*, *sleek chic*, *tough chic*, *trashy chic*, and so on.⁶⁵ This is why native Japanese terms (like

⁶⁴ *Elle* USA, September 2001, p. 455.

⁶⁵ In a single year (2001) of issues of British *Vogue* and *Elle*, I came across the following variations of *chic*: *aggressive chic*, *Boho chic*, *bombshell chic*, *bon chic*, *boy-chic*, *Brit chic*, *bubble-gum chic*, *buttoned-up chic*, *cartoon chic*, *casual chic*, *celluloid chic*, *chandelier chic*, *courtesan chic*, *deconstructed chic*, *fetish chic*, *fifties chic*, *girlie chic*, *glam chic*, *Grecian chic*, *Greek chic*, *gypsy chic*,

onnarashii and *j hin*) are found in parallel usage with almost, but not quite identical, English loanword synonyms (*femininity* and *elegant*). Together, across both time and space, they are used by different people to mark out and contest semantic territory in which local cultural preferences engage with globalizing norms of fashion taste. ✍

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heroine chic, masculine chic, minimalist chic, military chic, moody chic, oh-so-chic, Parisian chic, porn chic, primitive chic, ready steady chic, rebel chic, rock chic, salvage chic, severe chic, slick chic, spiky chic, sport chic, survivor chic, tomboy chic, tongue-in-chic, tough chic, trashy chic, ultra chic, urban chic, and vintage chic.

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