

RECLAIMING FASHION

Caroline Holder

Clothing plays the same prominent part in our cultural life as it has throughout history. We all wear clothes, yet as a subject worthy of serious discussion, fashion remains a point of contention between feminists and socialists.

For those who hold it in contempt, fashion retains many of its traditional associations as a principally female preoccupation; the changing nature of clothes is dismissed as something arbitrary and meaningless. This inherited attitude towards clothes is reinforced by men who consider themselves to live in a world apart from such trivial considerations as what they wear. Their fear of clothes is concealed behind a multitude of claims: that they don't care about the way they look; that they aren't subject to the dictates of fashion and thereby in some way they 'transcend' it. Because of the pleasure factor that is normally associated with clothes, to make an effort about them, to men, would seem a contradiction.

Women know otherwise. Against and through a barrage of pressures, social and personal, feminists have had to come face to face with what to do with the images the fashion industry has contrived for women to 'choose' from. An earlier solution to the enormous importance attached to the way we looked was a rejection of the problem altogether: to deny the pleasurable aspects of clothing and detach ourselves from the way we looked.

A different and more defiant approach is now being found. Against the old dictum of dressing to please men, women are actively reclaiming the pleasure for themselves. Speaking up through what you wear can be a powerful vehicle of expression. Fashion is just one reflection of society, and the rules about what women can and cannot wear are continually being challenged. That flat shoes have become fashionable is a wonder-

ful thing (let alone a joy to wear). At last, clothes that are relevant can be functional and fun to wear. Dilemmas such as long hair versus short hair, dyed versus natural, trousers versus dresses, are fading into the past. And so, irreversible steps are made towards ridding the meaning that not only men, but also women, have attached for example, to the wearing of skirts. In changing the context, one changes its associations.

Ambivalence in dress is still however a necessity for many women. The power to be defiant has to coexist with an ability (mental and physical) to cope with harassment on the streets. To dissemble, to practice invisibility until it becomes so ingrained on one's nature that it's hard to locate, is a source of much resentment.

Back in 1976, punk freed men to care about the way they looked; to play around and experiment in traditionally female areas. For women it means that they could look aggressive and hostile and feel good. The style of punk broke all previous boundaries of what constituted good taste in dress. But once the strength of the movement diminished, the clothes in themselves became no more than fashionable — and soon to be out of date — clothing. Punk was originally about confrontation, but all strong group identities can quickly turn into a barricade against the world: an identity which is too protective, turns in upon itself and remains static. Women, facing the ongoing and often contradictory process of reclaiming the right to pleasure in clothes, while defying stereotypes, needed new identities.

An interesting comparison can be made between the response by the women's fashion industry to ideas originating from the street, and the mainstream of the men's fashion industry. Here there has been no reflection of these dramatic changes. This speaks sadly not only for the designers and mass

producers within the male market, but also for the majority of men who showed no interest in changing their own notions of what they would and wouldn't wear. As long as the men who demonstrate that they care about the way they look remain cult figures, then industry will never have to change. It will only react when men begin to ask a great deal more in the choice of clothes that are made available to them. The smaller the social grouping, the more the market can afford to ignore you.

The man who is afraid of clothes demonstrates a passivity, and with this, an unwillingness to change. So much so that one would imagine he has something to lose if he did. Dismissing thought about clothes as a feminine and effeminate preoccupation is to relegate dress to the same status as housework. Men rely in this way on a very ancient *status quo*: that women provide the decorative features in life, much in the same way as they are depended upon to do the emotional work or to take responsibility for contracep-



tion. It is undeniable that change involves being uncomfortable, making mistakes, sticking your neck out and even (gasp) being laughed at. More than that, it requires thought, awareness and effort.

The designers' dictatorship of fashion trends appears to have been broken. It is now apparent that ideas originating from the street increasingly influence the styles that will enter into mass production. From a few designers responding to, and to a certain extent being able to anticipate changing needs, the process by which clothes arrive on the market has been altered. The styles from which we can choose offer a truer reflection of what women 'are'. The fashion industry realises that the concept of producing a 'new look' twice a year is both obsolete and impossible to sustain. Even now, some designers are claiming not to work in the field of fashion at all, and in time this may become reality.

Now that social pressure is less of a factor in the buying of clothes, we are all freer to take the initiative from love. Women have found new reasons for loving clothes, and a new confidence in the clothes they choose. How long will it take for men to take up a similar responsibility for themselves? •