

2600 words Decoding the Contested aesthetics of contemporary men's fashion.

How do competing models of masculinity express themselves on and off the catwalk?

SLIDE 1

In 2017, the market research company Euromonitor stated that menswear spending had grown by 4.5 percent in the previous year, well outstripping womenswear growth; market researchers IbisWorld found that online sales of men's fashion had grown at a faster rate over the past five years than any other product category (Davidson, 2015: 3), and—looking into the future—Intel predicted a 27 percent growth rate in men's fashion over the next five years.

In this present decade, there has been an amplification of discourse surrounding men's fashion as journalists, marketers, trend prediction agencies, and others have woken up to the increasing commercial significance of fashion for men. New men's fashion weeks, magazines, blogs and vlogs have been founded, and labels have proliferated.

As a design discipline too, menswear represents a dynamic, energetic, and innovative field. On the Paul Smith catwalk for Spring/Summer 2018, for instance, a fantastic sense of fun, colour, and excitement could be seen: high-waisted trousers with multiple pleats appeared in vivid burnt orange, paired with fluid drape jackets in fuchsia and acid yellow. At Rick Owens, a futuristic mood prevailed: models wore sleeveless tunics with ballooning woven panels, some in transparent mesh, teamed with shorts; space-age, slouchy, sneaker-boots to create a strange bulging silhouette. These two collections, and many others of the same season, point to the continued vibrancy of menswear, which, over the past two decades, has explored and interrogated masculinity more engagingly and thoughtfully than perhaps any other field of creative practice.

In commenting upon and analysing these phenomena, a common question has been "Why now?" Why is men's fashion enjoying this renaissance, and what does this mean for men and masculinity more generally? but as well as investigating the factors that have contributed to contemporary menswear's creativity and commercial success, it is equally important to ask what has impinged upon it hitherto? And, in so doing, to examine the ways in which

men's fashion over the past two decades has acted to resist a set of dominant discourses emerging as a locus of aesthetic and ideological contestation?

Notwithstanding the dynamism of the men's runway, the notion that menswear doesn't change; the idea that men aren't interested in fashion; and the suspicion that those who are engaged in fashionable display, represent a failed and invalid form of masculinity, continues to be heard in contemporary media discourse.

NEW SLIDE 2

As menswear has gained prominence as a design discipline over the past two decades, new forms of identity and gendered practice have emerged in dialogue with men's fashion. In turn spawning a variety of epithets, neologisms and portmanteau – from the hipster to the spornosexual – whose currency point both to the increasing plurality of male identity in the twenty-first century and to the media's unease at men's adoption of apparently feminising practices. In a North American and specifically New York context, the term “hipster” — as associated with fashionable scenesters and trendy hangouts in gentrifying areas—was already in use by the early 2000s. But it is in the mid-to-late 2000s that hipster re-entered the mainstream lexicon to describe a style and lifestyle that might previously have been described as “indie”. Hipsters were the young, arty-looking, vintage-clad inhabitants of down-at-heel but now regenerating urban areas, and the term held a generally pejorative set of connotations—particularly of inauthenticity and superficiality.

A huge volume of popular discourse has emerged around hipsterism since 2007, some of it celebratory, but the vast majority arch, critical, or downright hostile. And while some writers have sought to rehabilitate the hipster, the highly gendered nature of hipster critiques and their impact on cultures of masculinity are rarely discussed or acknowledged. In the blogs that arose during the late 2000s, including Hackney Hipster Hate and Look at This Fucking Hipster, posts typically featured androgynously or extravagantly dressed men sporting pendants, short-shorts, low-cut T-shirts, big-glasses, tight trousers, or similar apparel. The image conjured up by the term “hipster,” at least in popular consciousness, is almost always male and some 80 percent of the results generated by a Google Image search are of men. Female hipsters are less likely to be the focus of debate, attention, or stigma since their fashionability is less likely to be deemed transgressive, and because female hipsterism is difficult to distinguish from other forms of fashionable femininity.

An example of the way in which notions of masculinity inform critiques of hipsterism is found in a 2010 post from Hackney Hipster Hate featuring a photograph of a rather forlorn young man sitting on the pavement beside the closed grill of a shop. The blog's author writes:

All crashed out, mewling like a sick kitten and clearly wrecked after a night on the boutique lagers and face powders! Look at his silly pink socks! Check out the crayon-blue skinnys [jeans]! What an irredeemable, spluttering twat! No wonder he feels the need to dowse himself in other people's piss down there on the paving. It's the essential punishment for being a ridiculously-dressed wreck ... You might feel it's cruel to expose someone so vulnerable on a blog like this. He might have had his iPhone snaffled ... or his earnings swiped. I'M GLAD HE'S A MESS. I HOPE HE GOES TO PRISON. I HATE HIM BY SIGHT ALONE.

There is an obvious violence to Hackney Hipster Hate's contempt for this unfortunate stranger, but the precise terms in which this anger is expressed are also informative. The hipster's clothing, of course, is singled out for critique, but there is also a sense in which his fragility—with its attendant cultural associations of effeminacy and immaturity—has provoked the blogger's ire. This is reflected in the terminology used to describe the young man: "mewing," "kitten," "pink," "boutique," "twat," and "vulnerable" which, troublingly, seem to justify the authors' wish to see him debased, as forcefully expressed in the nouns "piss," "punishment," and "hate."

Writing more recently in 2013, Judith Woods at The Daily Telegraph focused her critiques more broadly on men's increased interest in fashion. Describing metrosexuals as "she-men," "insufferable sissies," "needy and vain," and as "petulant as princesses," she declared:

[They] know their way around the Clarins counter considerably better than they do any B&Q ... Welcome to modern men—the metrosexual monsters we have created. According to a new survey, a horrifying one in five women claims their partner is so high-maintenance that he spends longer in the bathroom than they do ... their sissification has gone too far. There's something very disturbing about going out with a chap who is prettier than you are ... Frankly, I couldn't care about lipstick on his collar. But the day he comes home with a shea butter lip balm in his pocket is the day I move out. (2013: 35).

As theorists such as Judith Butler and Erving Goffman affirm, identities—including masculine identities—are performative; which is to say they are continually produced and reproduced through social practice. Nevertheless, despite the well-established nature of these theories and their considerable acceptance within the academy, in much popular discussion masculinity continues to be viewed as a unitary, coherent, and relatively immutable identity. Adherents of traditional menswear and critics of new fashionable masculinities lean heavily on notions of an unchanging, essential masculinity in their prescriptions of “acceptable” masculine dress and comportment. Using irony or playfulness in the construction of a male identity, or otherwise drawing attention to its constructedness threatens the whole edifice of masculinity. It implies that men can or could be other, and that men’s subjectivities are contingent and open to question.

Proscriptions against male “pretension,” “narcissism” and against modish dress are predicated on a sexism that holds men and women to fundamentally different standards of behaviour. These taboos against men’s self-expression police gender by enforcing a single, hegemonic, orthodox form of masculinity and by militating against the emergence of plural masculinities. The stigmatization of fashionable male identities acts to sure up the position of those men whose power and authority is based on their allegiance to orthodox masculinity (and to relatively secure markers of status such as social class, occupation, and educational attainment). Conversely, these discourses devalue emergent, subcultural, and avant-garde forms of masculine identity—which are often based on more diffuse forms of (sub)cultural capital including appearance and fashionability. But as social practices have shifted over the past three decades, this narrow and unitary conception of masculinity has become more difficult to defend.

NEW SLIDE 3

The potent and controversial nature of men’s fashion has rendered the men’s catwalk a crucial site for the contestation of orthodox masculinity over the past twenty years. And indeed, the rejection of normative gender vales has been fundamental to the emergence of menswear not only as an important creative medium, but also as a fast-growing sector of the market.

In the run-up to the millennium designers such as Raf Simons, Hedi Slimane, Ennio Capasa, Tom Ford, and Helmut Lang were proposing a new menswear aesthetic with ever greater confidence: it was a look characterized by a close-

cleaving silhouette, translucent fabrics, dandyish tailoring, and bare skin. The significance of this shift in menswear was felt in the journalism that responded to these designers' collections. As Amy Spindler for The New York Times put it, designers like Ford, "instead of gearing designer suits to make men look successful, powerful and established," were making them seem "younger, thinner and sexier". Meanwhile, Raf Simons' punk references, cobweb sweaters and skinny, wan teenage models garnered attention by presenting a vision of menswear that radically diverged from the tanned, muscular, commercial look that had dominated the previous decade.

Though Simons, Lang, and Ford all attracted column inches at the turn of the millennium, it was Slimane's bold intervention in men's fashion—first at Yves Saint Laurent and subsequently at Dior Homme—that most emphatically signaled a repudiation of the normative discourses we reviewed earlier — and from the narrow model of men's fashion that had gained hegemony over the course of the 1990s. Charlie Porter, writing in The Guardian in 2001, declared:

Nothing exciting is meant to happen in men's fashion. Yet in Paris right now, the talk is all of Hedi Slimane, the designer whose work at the newly established Dior Homme is provoking a radical rethink in the stagnating ateliers of menswear.

Slimane himself—speaking in an interview for L'Officiel in 2001—explicitly refers to masculinity as a set of arcane rules and arbitrary constraints that he attempts to push against, resist (and perhaps ultimately reform). He states:

There is a psychology to the masculine: we're told don't touch it; it's ritual, sacred, taboo. It's difficult but I'm making headway, I'm trying to find a new approach. A men's collection can be creative, desirable, enlivened ... Menswear can become fashion too. I don't think this should be forbidden for men. I'm looking for a way through. I want to create something with a closeness, a sense of intimacy, a directness.

In Helmut Lang's collections from the late 1990s to the mid-2000s, there is a sense of, quite literally, deconstructing conventional menswear. In his Spring/Summer 2004 collection, apertures and cut-out sections bisect shirts and jackets, and unfurl across vests—exposing here a midriff, there a nipple, here an arm. These curious, asymmetric garments disrupt and unsettle expectations and are about as far away as one can imagine from the pedantic sartorial codes mandated in conventional guides to men's dress.

In the work of Lang, Slimane, and Simons, then, there is a concerted effort to overturn the standards, assumptions, and aesthetics of normative masculinity, to reject and replace them with something else: a celebration not of strength, dominance, and conformity, but of a much more ambiguous, liminal gender identity. Slimane's radical approach to menswear during the early and mid-2000s— androgynous, glamorous, and sported by rangy indie musicians—can be read as a kind of reverse discourse, in which fashion as a “matrix of transformation”, as Michel Foucault might have put it, acts to celebrate and legitimize forms of masculinity that had previously been stigmatized.

NEW SLIDE 4

In recent years, menswear practitioners have continued to explore, transgress, and deconstruct masculinity. Indeed, transgressive aesthetics on the catwalk have become ever more pronounced. Designers like Alessandro Michele, J. W. Anderson, Grace Wales Bonner, Katie Eary, Charles Jeffrey, and Meadham Kirchhoff have introduced provocatively queered and androgynous menswear aesthetics that explicitly challenge the values of aggression, dominance, and invulnerability that characterize what Raewyn Connell terms hegemonic masculinity. Grace Wales Bonner, whose work responds to the hyper-masculinized stereotyping of black men in popular culture, states:

I've seen enough images of black men looking really aggressive, very hypersexualised or “street.” That's not how I think about men at all. Those aren't the men in my life.

The liminal, hybrid nature of Grace Wales Bonner's work is founded not only on a playful transgression of gender boundaries, but also on a cross-fertilization of European and African aesthetics and more generally an exploration of black style. In the four collections from her debut Spring/Summer 2015 *Afrique*, Wales Bonner has developed a distinctive set of codes referencing West Africa through cowrie shells, skull caps, opulent fabrics, and a high-waisted 1970s silhouette that recalls the photographs of Malick Sidibé and Samuel Fosso. In her Autumn/Winter 2015 collection *Ebonics*, crystal chokers gleamed against bare skin, while a white waistcoat and cummerbund worn without a shirt drew attention to the model's sinuous body—his bare arms sparkling with bijouterie and streaked in iridescent blue. This subversion and rejection of normative masculinity on the part of Wales Bonner is felt all the more strongly since black masculinity has so often been caught within an ultra-macho, ultra-phallicized set of racist representations

Her Spring/Summer 2017 show Ezekiel built upon the dandyish, diasporic, androgynous aesthetic codes explored in her previous collections, but this time drew upon Ethiopian imperial garb to communicate a strong sense of refinement and elegance. A sumptuous white suit featured high-waisted trousers, short at the ankle like a toreador's, with an intricate pattern of palms embroidered the length of the leg; these were accompanied by a short, stand-collar jacket upon which fronds of intertwining trees, in satin cord, wound their way up the sleeves to bear fat garlands of pearls as their fruit. An ensemble that encapsulated the lushness, sensuality, and fecundity that is expressed in Wales Bonner's androgynous exoticism.

Elsewhere on the catwalk, designers like Craig Green, Ximon Lee and Juun J have continued the work of Helmut Lang by deconstructing men's fashion. Drawing on East Asian paradigms, these designers have reimagined menswear at the level of cut and form, swathing their models in meters of cloth, but maintaining a sense of an ambiguous corporeality through strange lattices and apertures, or with long bare legs protruding from abbreviated shorts.

NEW SLIDE 5

With the transgressive example of subculture as their model, designers from the turn of the millennium to the present day have used menswear to advance a form of "reverse discourse": challenging the values of orthodox masculinity by reclaiming and reframing qualities such as fragility, sensitivity, and sensuality as positive and desirable. Over the past two decades, as sociologists such as Eric Anderson and Christensen and Jensen have demonstrated, contemporary masculinity has been significantly reformed, opening up to become more inclusive and more plural as young men, in particular, have become increasingly disenchanted with the values of orthodox masculinity and instead embraced more inclusive, egalitarian forms of masculinity. A recent YouGov poll found that only 2 percent of men in the 18–24 age bracket in the UK perceived themselves as "fully masculine" and that conventional masculinity was perceived negatively by 42 percent of young men aged 18–24. And this realignment is reflected across a range of attitudinal data collected using a variety of methodologies. The transformation of men's fashion, which I have discussed in this paper, has acted both to catalyse these shifts (by creating new forms of subjectivity, experience, and new patterns of consumption for men) and simultaneously to reflect the movement of broader cultural tectonics.

It would be complacent to suggest that the explosion in new forms of masculine subjectivity through dress and fashion represents unequivocal evidence of sexism's demise for good. Paradoxically, the increased visibility of aggressively reactionary forms of masculinity—most powerfully symbolized by the election of Donald Trump—has coincided with radically inclusive forms of gender identity. And these two mutually opposing forms of gendered practice point to the fragility and internal contradictions of orthodox masculinity which, delinked from its economic basis, becomes either an exaggerated and self-conscious form of bravado, or is replaced by something else. The achievements of men's fashion since the turn of the millennium form an integral part of a process of contestation: new modes of representation and practice that have acted, and continue to act, to repudiate essentialist dogmas of gender.