USA Pop

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To Phyllis

Fashion is a very prestigious subject in the sociological tradition, at the same time as being apparently rather frivolous….If there is one thing that I want to communicate…it is that there are scientific profits to be drawn from scientifically studying "unworthy" objects.

—Pierre Bourdieu. *Sociology in Question.*

CONTENTS

Detailed Contents

Dedication

Epigraph

Contents

List of Illustrations

Acknowledgments

Introduction
What is fashion?
How does fashion differ from style?
What do we mean by culture?

Chapter 1: In the Beginning
The Story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden
Nudism and nakedness
There's no accounting for taste
Emile Durkheim on individuals in society
Pierre Bourdieu on taste
Grid-Group theories and preferences
Mary Douglas on lifestyles and preferences

Chapter 2: Imitation and fashion
Klapp on fashion in the Sixties
The Broadway Riders

Chapter 3: The Semiotics of Fashion
Semiotics and signs
The importance of codes
Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics*
Peirce's semiotics
Semioticians on meanings and codes

Chapter 4: Gender and Culture
Judith Butler on gender as Performance
LGBTIQ+ and culture

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

INTRODUCTION

Fig. 0.1

Apprentice Geishas. Photo by the Author.

I begin with a discussion of the various meanings of the term "popular."

The Meanings of the Term "Popular"

The term "popular" is a rather complicated one; almost as complicated as the term "culture," which I'll discuss shortly. "Popular" comes from the Latin term *popularis,* which means "people." There are several meanings connected with the term popular: first, involving the people in general; second, suitable for the people (in that sense that it is easy to comprehend); third, having widespread acceptance or appeal.

A thesaurus offers several other aspects of the term such as: "approved," "beloved," "common," "customary," "desired," "famous," "fashionable," "lay," "prevalent," "public," and "usual." And for the related term "popularize," it suggests "explain," "vulgarize," and "make understandable." We see, then, that *popular* contains several different meanings.

        When critics write about popular culture, they tend to use it in a negative sense—works of art that are easy to understand, that cater to the "lowest common denominator," that are vulgar, trite, formulaic, sexist, superficial, and so on. Some years ago I wrote an article that was titled "Why is Popular Culture So Unpopular?" My point was that popular culture is "unpopular" with elites who tend to look down upon the public and particularly upon public taste in art, literature, film, theater, and so on. Popular culture is, of course, very popular with the general public (or "populace") for whom it is created.

        What's important to understand is that criticism of popular culture on the taste level will almost always find it inferior to "elite" works of art; that's a given, most of the time. Popular culture is worth studying because of its role in shaping people's identities, in giving people ideas about what's good and bad, what's beautiful and ugly, what's important and trivial, and so on. That is, we study popular culture because of its role in socializing and enculturating people, because of what it reflects about culture and society (or about subcultures and other groups of people). Popular culture also has played a role in shaping so-called "elite" culture so there are even aesthetic reasons for investigating popular culture. And, of course, some popular culture is aesthetically satisfying, too. It isn't all junk—though most of it is!

        In the chart below, I suggest (in a somewhat oversimplified way) the differences between popular culture—that is, popular works of art or mass-mediated works of art--and elite works of art as elite critics see things. To make things simple, we can think of two works: Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and the film *Avatar* I am taking two extreme examples to make my point and to clarify things. But we could do the same even with less extreme examples.

Popular Works of Art	Elite Works of Art
Avatar	*Hamlet*
Mass-produced	Works of individual creators
Mass mediated	Not mass-mediated as a rule
Lowest Common Denominator	For refined sensibilities
Short life in media	Timeless
Little insight into human nature	Brilliant insights into human nature
Simple-minded	Incredibly complex

Works of Popular Culture & Elite Culture Contrasted

I realize, of course, that I have taken extreme *texts* (the term academic critics use for plays, movies, poems, comic books, advertisements, videos, and so on) to make my point. If we make a film of *Hamlet* and it is shown in movie houses, then later on television, we have what was originally an elite text shown in a mass medium. Does that mean it is now popular culture?

In the last few decades, our attitudes about films have changed. When they were "movies" they were seen as popular culture; when they became "film" (as in "art films") they were seen as works of elite culture. The point is, a given medium can be used for both popular and elite culture. It's not the medium that's crucial—it's the text! If I had chosen Orson Welles' film, *Citizen Kane* or Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (which has recently replaced *Citizen Kane* as "the best film ever made") the polarity sketched out above would not be correct.

Since I have used the term "culture" a good deal, it is worth considering the various meanings of "culture." After all, popular culture is a kind of culture!

Culture

Culture is one of the more complicated words we will be dealing with. One of the problems we encounter is that there are many different meanings attached to the term. We think of culture two ways: one in terms of aesthetic matters (relative to the arts) and also as a concept used by anthropologists to describe a people's way of life. There are something like a hundred different definitions of culture used by anthropologists, so I understand.

The word "culture" comes from the Latin *cultus,* which means "care" and from the French *colere* which means "to till" as in "till the ground." There are several words associated with culture. For example, there is the term "cult" which suggests something religious or sacred. We are continually amazed at the power cults have to shape people's behavior, to brainwash them—to turn intelligent and educated people into fanatics. Here we are dealing with the power of charismatic personalities and groups over individuals. If cults can exercise enormous power over individuals and groups of people, can't we say that cultures also can do the same thing, though not to as extreme a degree, generally speaking?

There is also the term "cultivated," which means either growing something or, in the realm of aesthetics and the arts, sophisticated taste. Just as plants only exist because they are cared for by some cultivator, over some time, so people's taste and cultivation only are developed by education and training. It takes time to develop a refined sensibility, to become discriminating,

to appreciate texts that are difficult and complex, and not immediately satisfying. Let me offer a typical anthropological definition of culture. This one is quite old but it is useful because it covers most of the bases. It is by Charles A. Ellwood and is found in Henry Pratt Fairchild's *Dictionary of Sociology and Related Sciences* (1967:80):

> A collective name for all behavior patterns socially acquired and transmitted by means of symbols; hence a name for all the distinctive achievements of human groups, including not only such items as language, tool-making, industry, art, science, law, government, morals and religion but also the material instruments or artifacts in which cultural achievements are embodied and by which intellectual cultural features are given practical effect, such as buildings, tools, machines, communication devices, art objects, etc.

Let's consider some of the topics Fairchild mentions.

Behavior Patterns.
We are talking about codes and patterns of behavior here that are found in groups of people.

Socially Acquired.
We are taught these behavior patterns as we grow up in a family in some geographical location and are profoundly affected by the family we are born into, its religion, and all kinds of other matters.

Transmitted through Symbols. This refers to language and works of art, both of which have a profound impact on our psyches and our consciousness. It also can be understood to refer to communication of all kinds and involving all media: spoken words, facial expression, mass-mediated, and so on.

The Distinctive Achievements of Human Groups. This is important because it points out that it is in groups that we become human and become enculturated or acculturated (two words for the same thing, for all practical purposes). We have our distinctive natures but we are also part of society.

Artifacts in which cultural achievements are embodied. The artifacts we are talking about here are the popular culture texts carried in the various media and other non-mediated aspects of popular culture (or not directly mediated) such as fashions in clothes, food, artifacts (what anthropologists call "material culture") language use, sexual practices and related matters. We know that a lot of our popular culture, while not carried by the media, is nevertheless profoundly affected by it.

We can see, then, that popular culture plays some kind of role in shaping our consciousness and our behavior. When I say "our" behavior, I mean my behavior and your behavior. You may think you are immune from the impact of the media and popular culture, but that is a delusion that is generated, I would suggest, by the media. We think we are not affected by the media and popular culture (sometimes called mass-mediated culture) but we are wrong. We must make a distinction between affected by and determined by here. Popular culture affects us but it doesn't necessarily determine every act we do…though some scholars, who believe the media are very powerful, might argue with this point.

Now, I turn to one aspect of popular culture that is of interest—fashion. The term "fashion" comes from the term *facere,* which means to make or do. Its synonyms are style and mode when refereeing to clothing. Fashion can be defined as the prevailing style of dress at a particular time but it also refers to a broader set of behaviors involving matters such as fads, crazes, styles, and taste. It is a form of collective behavior, and thus of interest to various kinds of social scientists and scholars such as sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists, pop culturists, and semioticians. There are many different aspects of the relation between culture, fashion, taste, and style that this book will consider.

What is fashion?

The term generally applies to clothing and accessories but also to what is popular in many different areas of consumer culture and behavior. On Wikipedia we find the following description of fashion:

> Fashion is a popular aesthetic expression at a certain time and in a certain context, especially in clothing, footwear, lifestyle, accessories, makeup, hairstyle, and body proportions. Whereas a trend often connotes a very specific aesthetic expression, and often lasting shorter than a season, fashion is a distinctive and industry-supported expression traditionally tied to the fashion season and collections. Style is an expression that lasts over many seasons and is often connected to cultural movements and social markers, symbols, class, and culture (ex. Baroque, Rococo, etc.). According to sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, fashion connotes "the latest fashion, the latest difference."
>
> Even though they are often used together, the term fashion differs from clothes and costume, where the first describes the material and technical garment, whereas the second has been relegated to special senses like fancy-dress or masquerade wear. Fashion instead describes the social and temporal

system that "activates" dress as a social signifier in a certain time and context. Philosopher Giorgio Agamben connects fashion to the current intensity of the qualitative moment, to the temporal aspect the Greek called kairos, whereas clothes belong to the quantitative, to what the Greek called chronos.[4]

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fashion

How does fashion differ from style?

Style is defined in the Free Dictionary as follows:

1. The way in which something is said, done, expressed, or performed: a style of teaching.

2. The combination of distinctive features of literary or artistic expression, execution, or performance characterizing a particular person, group, school, or era.

3. Sort; type: a style of furniture.

4. A quality of imagination and individuality expressed in one's actions and tastes: does things with style.

5.
a. A comfortable and elegant mode of existence: living in style.
b. A mode of living: the style of the very rich.

6.
a. The fashion of the moment, especially of dress; vogue: clothes that are in style.
b. A particular fashion: the style of the 1920s.

https://www.thefreedictionary.com/style

As we can see, there is some overlap between style and fashion but there are differences worth keeping in mind.

How is fashion related to taste?

Taste is a sociological construct that involves people's preferences, a topic I will discuss in more detail in the book. Wikipedia discusses taste as a social and cultural phenomenon:

In sociology, taste is an individual's personal, cultural, and aesthetic patterns of choice and preference. Taste is drawing distinctions between things such as styles, manners, consumer goods, and works of art and relating to these. Social inquiry of taste is about the human ability to judge what is beautiful, good, and proper.

Social and cultural phenomena concerning taste are closely associated with social relations and dynamics between people. The concept of social taste is therefore rarely separated from its accompanying sociological concepts. An understanding of taste as something that is expressed in actions between people helps to perceive many social phenomena that would otherwise be inconceivable.

Aesthetic preferences and attendance to various cultural events are associated with education and social origin. Different socioeconomic groups are likely to have different tastes. Social class is one of the prominent factors structuring taste.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taste_%28sociology%29

Fig. 0.2

Bronislaw Malinowski

The anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski described what he called "imponderabilia" of everyday life—our working routines, the foods we eat, the clothes we wear, our conversations and social lives, the things we own and exchange for other things--that must be studied to determine the values and beliefs found in them. He explained his notions about imponderabilia in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* as follows: (1961:18-19):

Here belong such things as the routine of a man's working day, the details of his care of the body, of the manner of taking food and preparing it; the tone of conversational and social life around the village fires, the existence of strong friendships or hostilities...All these facts can and ought to be

scientifically formulated and recorded, but it is necessary that this be done, not by a superficial registration of details, as is usually done by untrained observers, but with an effort at penetrating the mental attitude expressed in them.

Thus, a mere description is not enough, Malinowski says, for our ultimate aim when analyzing objects and artifacts is to discover the emotional attitudes people have about the objects they own and to discern what they reflect about the culture and society in which they were created.

   A French psychoanalyst and marketer, Clotaire Rapaille, suggests that young children between the ages of one and seven become "imprinted" with various codes, distinctive to where they grow up, that, generally speaking, shape their behavior, attitudes, and tastes for the remainder of their lives. And they usually are not exposed to other cultures.

Fig. 0.3

Clotaire Rapaille.

   As he explains in his book *The Culture Code* (2006:10-11):

All of the different codes for all of the different imprints, when put together, create a reference system that people living in these cultures use without being aware of it. These reference systems guide different cultures in different ways.

Rapaille concludes that "what we have always suspected is true—that despite our common humanity, people around the world really *are* different."

Other Considerations

   There are many other topics relating to fashion, style, and taste that I will discuss in this book and will answer such questions as what is fashion's relation to demographic matters such as race, religion, age, gender, place,

and socio-economic status? Does fashion have political significance? What is the relation between fashion and technology?

I will also consider different areas where fashion and style play a role, such as Hairstyles, Women's Shoes, Bread, Handbags, Fashion Advertising, Toilets and Toilet Paper, Gender, and Costume, Myth and Fashion, Coffee, Pornography and Society, etc. There are countless other matters relating to fashion, culture style, and taste that might be considered and dealt with. I am a semiotician who is also drawn to psychoanalytic theories, Marxist theories, and sociological theories, so you will find many different approaches in my analysis of culture, style, fashion, and taste—that is, pop culture and everyday life.

Nudity, or nakedness, is a state of being in which a human is not wearing clothing or is not covering the genitals.[1] In some societies, partial nudity is defined as not covering other parts of the body that are deemed to be sexual.

Nakedness was the natural state of human beings in the tropical climates where they first evolved and continues to be the norm in many isolated indigenous societies during the 21st century. The modern understanding of nudity is culturally complex due to different meanings given various states of undress in differing social situations. In any particular society, nudity is defined in relation to being properly dressed, not in relation to the specific body parts exposed.

For humans, nakedness and clothing are connected to many cultural categories such as identity, privacy, social status and moral behavior.[2] Synonyms and euphemisms for nudity abound, including "birthday suit", "in the altogether" and "in the buff". "In a state of nature" is also used by philosophers to refer to the state of humans before the existence of organized societies.[3]

In Western societies, there are two contradictory cultural traditions relating to nudity. The first comes from the ancient Greeks, who saw the naked body as the natural state and as essentially positive. The second is based upon the Abrahamic religions, which have viewed being naked as shameful and essentially negative. The fundamental teachings of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam prohibit public, and sometimes also private nudity. However, the interaction between the Greek classical and later traditions has resulted in Western ambivalence, with nudity representing both positive and negative meanings in individual psychology, in social life, and in depictions such as art.[4] In modern times, organized groups of nudists or naturists have emerged with the stated purpose of regaining a natural connection to the human body and nature, sometimes in private spaces but also in public.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nudity

CHAPTER 1

IN THE BEGINNING

We begin our examination of fashion in the Garden of Eden. If you read the Old Testament, you discover that, in the beginning, Adam and Eve didn't wear clothes. Nakedness was our natural state and it was only after the snake in the Garden of Eden convinced Eve to take a bite of an apple from the tree of knowledge (and she convinced Adam to take one) that they realized they were naked and covered themselves up.

The Story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Paradise

And the serpent said unto the woman,
"Ye shall not surely die: for God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good from evil.

And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat. And the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons.

It turns out that God was walking in the garden so Adam and Eve hid themselves. God didn't see Adam and called out to him, "Where art thou?" Adam replied, "I was afraid because I was naked; and I hid myself." And Adam called his wife's name Eve; because she was the mother of all living. Unto Adam and to his wife did the Lord God make coats of skins, and clothed them.

—Ernest Sutherland Bates. *The Bible Designed to Be Read as Living Literature: The old and new testaments in the King James Version*. 1951.

God then expelled Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. In Adam's fall, we sinned all some people believe. So, we might say that fashion and being clothed started in the Bible and God was the first tailor.

Fig. 1.1

Mircea Eliade

Mircea Eliade, a scholar of religion, explains in his book *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* that (1961:135):

> Paradise implies the absence of garments, that is, the absence of attrition, wear (archetypal image of time). All ritual nudity implies an atemporal model, a paradisal image.

So there is a connection, as far as myth is concerned with nudity and with innocence and this connection may also explain the thinking behind nudists in contemporary societies. Nudity can be seen as an unconscious attempt to return to paradise. Eliade argues that ancient myths still shape much of our behavior. He writes (1961:204-205):

> The majority of the "irreligious" still behave religiously, even though they are not aware of the fact. We refer not only to the modern man's many "superstitions" and "tabus," all of them magico-religious in structure. But the modern man who feels that he is nonreligious still retains a large stock of camouflaged myths and degenerated rituals….A whole volume could well be written on the myths of modern man, on the mythologies camouflaged in the plays he enjoys, in the books that he reads.

From Eliade's perspective, nudism would be based on myths that still inform much of our behavior, even though nudists may not be aware of the sacred roots of their behavior. From his point of view, nudism reflects an attempt to escape from time and return to the Garden of Eden.

Nudism and Nakedness

John Berger discusses the difference between being nude and naked in his book *Ways of Seeing.* He explains (1972:54)

> To be naked is to be oneself. To be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognized for oneself. A naked body has to be seen as an object in order to become a nude. (The sight of it as an object stimulates the use of it as an object.) Nakedness reveals itself. Nudity is placed on display. To be naked is to be without disguise. To be on display is to have the surface of one's own skin, the hairs of one's own body, turned into a disguise which, in that situation, can never be discarded. The nude is condemned to never being naked. Nudity is a form of dress. In the average European oil painting of the nude, the principal protagonist is never painted. He is the spectator in front of the picture and be is presumed to be a man. Everything is addressed to him. Everything must appear to be the result of his being there, it is for him that the figures have assumed their nudity. But he, by definition, is a stranger--with his clothes still on.

From Berger's point of view, then, there is an element of "display" in nudity and the paintings of nudes generally meant to provide a certain element pleasure to the spectators, mostly males, who gazed at nudes. We can say, then, that nakedness is natural and nudity is cultural and so is fashion. It is culture that creates fashion and shapes people's decisions about fashion in clothes and style and taste in other aspects of their lives.

Georg Simmel, a German sociologist, explains one way that fashion works:

> The vital life conditions of fashion as a universal phenomenon in the history of our species is circumscribed by these factors. Fashion is the imitation of a given pattern and thus satisfies the need for social adaptation; it leads the individual onto the path that everyone travels, it furnishes a general condition that resolves the conduct of every individual into a mere example. At the same time, and to no less degree, it satisfies the need for distinction, the tendency towards differentiation, change and individual contrast.
>
> —Georg Simmel, "Fashion, Adornment and Style" in David Frisby and Mike Featherstone, eds., *Simmel on Culture.*

We can say, then, that from the sociological perspective, we are all in society and that society is in all of us, whether we recognize that is the case or not.

There's No Accounting for Taste

When we say "There's no accounting for taste," we are saying, really, that taste is an individual matter, an idiosyncratic matter, and people's preferences cannot be explained. But that is not a correct assumption, for if taste were personal, there's be no such thing as fads and fashion.

Fig. 1.2
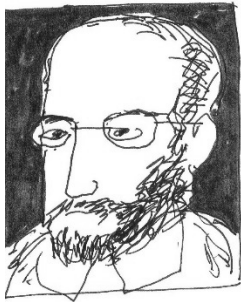
Georg Simmel

In his article on fashion, Georg Simmel (1858-1918) argues that (1997:187-189):

> The whole of society is reflected in the conflict, the compromise, the reconciliations, slowly won and quickly lost, that appear between adaptation to our social group and individual elevation from it….Within the social embodiment of these oppositions, one side is usually maintained by the psychological tendency towards imitation. Imitation could be characterized as a psychological inheritance, as the transition of group life into individual life….Fashion is, as I have said, a product of class division and operates—like a number of other forms of honour especially—the double function of holding a given social circle together and at the same time closing it off from others….Connection and differentiation are the two fundamental functions which are here inseparably united.

For Simmel, fashion has a double valence: it unites us with others in a group and also helps us differentiate ourselves from others outside the group.

Fig. 1.3

Emile Durkheim

Emile Durkheim on Individuals in Society

Emile Durkheim (1858-1917), the father of French sociology, made the same point in his classic study, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1915/1965:29):

> There are two beings in him: an individual being which has its foundation in the organism and the circle of whose activities is therefore strictly limited, and a social being which represents the highest reality in the intellectual and moral order that we can know by observation—I mean society. This duality of our nature has as its consequence in the practical order, the irreducibility of a moral ideal to a utilitarian motive, and in the order of thought, the irreducibility of reason to individual experience. In so far as he belongs to society, the individual transcends himself, both when he thinks and when he acts.

Each of us, for Durkheim, is a "double." We are all members of society and therefore "in" society, but, on the other hand, society is "in" us. We each have our own body and personality—that is, we are individuals—but we also are social animals who are members of society. And although we may not be aware of it, much of what we think and do, and, for our purposes, our attitudes toward fashion and style are influenced by our societal membership.

We now turn to the ideas of an influential French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, whose writings in his book *Distinction* and other writings have had a major impact on our thinking about taste, style, and related matters.

Fig. 1.4

Pierre Bourdieu

Pierre Bourdieu on Taste

A contemporary French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, (1930-2002) puts these ideas more succinctly. In his book, *Sociology in Question,* which is a collection of transcripts of his answer to questions during various interviews, he explains (1993:27):

> Sociology reveals that the idea of personal opinion (like the idea of personal taste) is an illusion…. If it is true that the idea of personal opinion itself is socially determined, that it is a product of history reproduced by education, that our opinions are determined, then it is better to know this, and if we have some chance of having personal opinions, it perhaps on condition that we know our opinions are not spontaneously so.

What we learn from Bourdieu, and from the other sociologists, is that personal taste is an illusion and what he says about opinion also applies to taste.

Grid-Group Theory and Preferences

This raises the question: if taste is cultural, how does culture shape our tastes. One answer to this question comes from Grid-Group theory, which was developed by an English social-anthropologist, Mary Douglas. I will explain what Grid-Group theory is by quoting from a book, *Cultural Theory,* written by Michael Thompson, Richard Ellis, and Aaron Wildavsky which deals with her ideas. The authors of *Cultural Theory* explain Grid-Group theory as follows (1990:5):