

# Emotional interaction and the avant-garde in fashion within contemporary atmospheres of mass production and consumerism

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## **Abstract**

Across the Western world, purchasing power is at an all time high and the consumerism of the general public has become increasingly aggressive and frequent. It is these levels of mass production and consumerism in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries that has driven a new focus for product development and the effect, which products have upon the culture that they are absorbed into. Where once international fashion designers would present seasonal collections that push the boundaries in design and technology, becoming 'fashion leaders' creating desire for their personal visions. Now, it can be argued that the Fashion Buyer has become the 'fashion leader' as they develop ranges for mass production and consumption by a public who essentially all end up looking the same. This familiarity does not breed contempt but rather comfort. Despite this, there remain consumers obsessed with the more avant-garde, which often leads to public ridicule for communicating a message different from the greater mass in an atmosphere where the semiotic exchange has become so standardised that anything else is seen as alien and even threatening, its value no longer recognisable. This paper explores semiotic standardisation through mass production and consumption and its affect on culture. How can there remain such desire for the avant-garde when the wearing of such, causes nothing but unwanted comment and attention? Can there be a stronger emotional interaction between the clothes and their wearer? How does semiotic exchanges in fashion differ and how have the avant-garde messages become unrecognisable? The paper will utilise a case study of the work of Vivienne Westwood and interviews with dedicated wearers of this designer's label to explore and highlight possible emotional relationships and broader cultural phenomena to understand the creation of demand in this area and begin to predict future potential.

Keywords:  
mass-consumption,  
semiotics,  
Vivienne Westwood

### **Introduction**

For eighteen years I have been buying and wearing the clothes of Vivienne Westwood. It soon became clear that there was something about wearing Westwood that was personally thrilling and led to the purchasing of increasingly more items, there were aspects at play here. This has led to analysing the effects of wearing Westwood and why such an addicted may be formed.

Greater interests to explore and understand fashion-purchasing patterns emerge. How are these patterns created and what is the effect upon the wearer? Particularly interesting is investigation into how in a current culture of mass production and mass consumerism with people all buying the same things, looking the same and expressing their individuality by all being different in the same way, how have the avant-garde fashion labels found themselves in a position of popularity? Can research support the idea that there is an emotional process, which takes place between Westwood's clothes and their wearer, which challenges and offers a completely different emotional experience from that of other designer and high street clothing?

### **Fashion for the economy – fashioning the culture**

In the Oxford Dictionary of English, commercial is described as an adjective; “concerned with or engaged in commerce; making or intending to make profit” and more interestingly; “(of chemicals) supplied in bulk and not of the highest purity.” What makes this later definition of greater interest is that within the fashion industry, the word commercial has come to mean the production of much diluted designs (even poor in design content and component quality) for the purpose of mass production to be sold on the high street. Of course, simply satisfying the need of your customer makes a design commercial, at any market level but for the fashion industry, commercial has become a description of a product market level itself.

Commercial ranges and the associated mass consumerism have made an impact on the society and culture, which they enter into. In the 1960s when catwalk driven fashion styles were heavily influencing the clothes of the high street, it was possible to shop around and find unique garments, from a myriad of independent retailers, affording the customer the opportunity to assemble their own version or vision of the

catwalk looks, whilst retaining their individuality, as it was their particular choice of garments from their own choice of retailers which created the image. Now, with so many thousands of each clothing unit available across the whole country and in so many cases, across several countries, people inevitably will be wearing exactly the same thing as other people. This leads to people all looking very similar if not identical through the shapes and styles of their clothing choices. If these parameters were not already enough, in order to make a product as desirable to as many consumers as possible, elements of design need to be kept to what could be considered *safe* options, so the use of colour, pattern and textiles are again limited to what is considered to be only the most, 'commercial.' Fashion buyers will focus their product development around key garment trends, which are emerging from the catwalk collections plus what is already popular on the high street. Inevitably, with all companies, focusing on the same inspirations, all fighting to attract the same customers, a very similar product emerges which is only distinguishable to each individual retailer through very small details within the design, this all leads to people (across a wide spectrum of class divisions) dressing very similarly, only distinguishable as an individual through very small details. To an outsider, this may sound like commercial madness, however in the instance of the fashion industry; familiarity does not seem to breed contempt, but rather contentment. Possibly, with such an enormous selection of clothing now available to the customer, having the main elements of ones style chosen for you is a relief, especially if there is still an allowance for the security of personal selection through detail. Really, there is no option here, as the consumer is still buying the standard five pocketed western jean, just one has the high street's new desperate attempt to maintain the ability to keep selling the same product to the same customers.

Of course, there have been reactionary movements against this standardisation of fashion and identity. Once such breakaway has been the revival of cast off period clothing, now cleaned up, pressed and relabelled as, 'vintage.' Steven Phillips, co-founder of the London based Rellik vintage clothing store, recently described how mass exposure of branded goods had cheapened designer fashion to a point where, 'you'd hear Tracy on the checkout at Tesco going, "I'm getting a Gucci bag this weekend, and a pair of sunglasses. If they're good enough for Posh

Spice...” Vintage exploded in the fashion scene but the money hungry high street was watching from the shadows and once the market was established, they pounced with even Top Shop dedicating space to vintage in their Oxford Street flagship store. The problem was that most of the high street vintage was not real, but rather mass produced and imported goods which were then customised to look vintage, but the effect was sloppy and cheap with sequins stuck on and gathered lace randomly applied across last seasons non-sellers. Shoppers bought into it though and again, the high street was killing individualism.

Tabloid press reported the clothes of avant-garde designers as a joke and that no one would ever really wear such a folly. This assumption in part was true, with most designers having very small numbers of sales and with their companies seemingly permanently about to be plunged into bankruptcy. However, this trend changed and even the most identifiably ridiculed designers have seen their companies and profits explode into success over the last ten years. A clear example of this is Vivienne Westwood. The designs from Vivienne Westwood still baffle and amuse the general public but more and more people are buying into the Westwood world and vision. When showing the Autumn/Winter 1994/95 collection, ‘On Liberty’ the *Daily Mirror* printed pictures from the collection on the front page of their newspaper, stating, ‘Vivienne Westwood dragged haute couture to a new low in Paris today.’ However, this was the beginning of Westwood rise to commercial success and the customers were buying it. Alternative press coverage of this collection, with the headline; ‘Queen Viv’ appeared in *Women’s Wear Daily*, where they described the collection as a, “clever, outrageous romp that was equal parts ridiculous and sublime – but always fun – long live the Queen!” What was interesting here was that it was described as, ‘fun.’ Fun in the Oxford Dictionary of English is described as a noun, meaning ‘light-hearted pleasure or amusement’ and an adjective meaning, ‘enjoyable.’ Could this be what people were missing from what the high street and other designer ranges were offering? Do Westwood customers want their fashion to be fun, light-hearted pleasure and most importantly, enjoyable? Could they be attracted to the stimulation of their *emotions* rather than just their eyes and their identical looking friend’s acceptance?

## Dressing up

'You have a much more interesting life when you wear impressive clothes.' (Vivienne Westwood, 2004)

The emotional relationship between Vivienne Westwood's clothes and their wearer is clearest when considering the traditional childish activity of rummaging through an elders closet and assembling an outfit which has no particular relevance to each piece being worn together other than simply they are there to be put on. The mix of textures, colours and especially proportion, adult sized details such as collars, buttons and prints against the much smaller frame of a child is nothing if not entertaining, playful and alternative to adult perceptions of dressing.

'With these clothes, you want to look rankish, you want to look like you can walk down the street feeling like you own it and you're Jack-the-Lad or whatever.' (John Savage 1981)

The child is 'dressing up' to become someone else and will often parade around the room, proud in their new outfit portraying an alternative personality and confidence.

At present, shoppers can take comfort in knowing that shopping within the high street ensures that their clothes communicate the correct message to receive acceptance, as it would be difficult to go wrong when most garments available are very similar. With the majority of the population forming a single group of which to be a member of, breaking away from this can be very dangerous for the wearer, so why do Westwood wearers do it? Through interviews and exploring the emotions related with wearing Westwood, it becomes clear that a common factor is that the wearer, when wearing Westwood no longer feels the pressure to communicate the correct messages to their peer group in order to be accepted. Instead, interestingly it has been commented that the communication and emotion is totally personal and the effect on the self is the main drive and thrill of wearing the clothes.

In 1987 when Westwood appeared on the nightly, prime time BBC chat show Wogan, she presented a small selection of outfits from her Spring/Summer 1998, Pagan I collection. These outfits consisted of her now infamous 'mini crini', a hooped crinoline dress which is only mini skirt length and Liberty bodice, a twentieth century, easy to wear, zip

up and breast push up version of the 18th century corset. As the models appeared on the stage the audience and the guest presenter proceeded to openly laugh out loud at the models in the clothes and the suggestion that people should actually wear them. At one point, the presenter pointed out to Westwood that the audience were laughing and asked if this is what they were supposed to do. "I think she feels wonderful and so they shouldn't be laughing."

Westwood's reply supported the notion of clothes are for the enjoyment of the wearer and not for acceptance into the general public. The emphasis was on feels, the emotional response from the clothing.

Another interesting example was in *The Sunday Times Magazine* (20 March 2004) where Hilary Rose and Jane Taylor-Hayhurst interviewed a range of people, who are all dedicated Westwood wearers. Peter Smithson commented, "A lot of people are scared of wearing Westwood because they think you need confidence." Looking more closely at this statement, it can be asked as to why confidence is important when it is only clothes? Reflecting on the communication issues, confidence required to wear Westwood can relate to no longer communicating the suitable message to be accepted by the mass general public. This issue is picked up again in the article during the interview with Serena Rees. During the interview she describes how she used to buy odd pieces from the Worlds End shop and, "felt really proud" when wearing the clothes. "There was a sense of discovery with Vivienne's outfits that I had never experienced with other clothes. When you are wearing Vivienne Westwood you feel incredibly sexy and confident. I discovered how something this special on the outside changed how I felt on the inside. I don't think I'll find anything that works so well for me." The emphasis in the above quotes lies on the words proud, sexy and confident. All of these are personally identifiable emotions and feelings that show no concern for what communication is being portrayed through the clothing to others.

### **Communication – fashion theory or fashion follies**

Fiske has presented that clothing or fashion can be used as a medium to express something about that person in order to evoke a reaction or change in the other person/receiver. Barnard explores this further by examining the social interaction constituting an individual as a member of a cultural group.

The clothing makes the individual a member of a group and then they interact socially. The Oxford Dictionary of English explains social as: 1. of or relating to society or its organisation; 2. Needing companionship; suited to living in communities; 3. Relating to or designed for activities in which people meet with other for pleasure. The idea of needing companionship elevates the desire of belonging to a group to a need, this need being so strong that people will cultivate their visual appearance so that acceptance can be immediately acknowledged, even before person to person contact, in fact making person to person contact irrelevant in order for the generic acceptance to take place. The origin of social comes from socius 'friend.' If clothing can communicate acceptance and a social acceptance, then the finding of friends can be easily achieved. With so many people all dressing essentially the same way, suddenly everyone becomes a friend. An individual following the mass consumption possibility is able to communicate with intent to thousands of other individuals (individual relating to a person of single number rather than of single mind) with great effectiveness; all experiencing a clear signal, 'this person is a friend.' This is mass acceptance achievable without a policy, advertising campaign or highly paid Public Relations Officer.

Of course everyone is aware of communication through clothing but the Westwood wearer does not appear to hold any interest in the text that they are communicating. Instead, the intent appears to be to communicate to oneself, to be effective in evoking powerful and pleasurable emotions with the intent of feeling belonging to and the satisfaction of their own desires and happiness rather than that of those surrounding them. This becomes clear when hearing Westwood wearer's comments.

'One of the most exciting things about wearing Vivienne's clothes is that one discovers a new person inside oneself. It's a little like being Cinderella – becoming beautiful, elegant and sexy all at once.'  
Serena Rees – Agent Provocateur (2000)

'I feel I am dressing more for myself than following the current trends.'  
Jessica Morris – Press Officer (2000)

'My Westwood clothes take me into a fantasy world.'  
Yoshii Ohta-Jones – Student (2000)

'In my opinion, Vivienne Westwood does not sell contemporary or trendy outfits. She sells attitude: well-being, comfort, elegance and self-confidence. I really do think that thanks to her, I have found my own style.' Aude Taittinger – Socialite (2000)

In Susie Rushton's piece on the Spring/Summer 2005 Westwood collection read; 'Although Westwood is rare among female designers in that she flaunts the sexuality of her clothes, rather than playing it down, it's worth noting that her primary objective is to make the wearer *feel sexy*, rather than necessarily *look sexy*. And it's very much appreciated, thank you.'

### **Unfashionable fashions**

Laurie describes clothing as a language, arguing that "we put on clothing for some of the same reasons as we speak." These reasons include to 'proclaim or disguise.' (Laurie 1992: 27). The *Diary of a Westwood Wearer* (Paul McNicoll, 2006) talks of how when a particularly powerful outfit has been put together, there is an internal, 'heroic' feeling best described by Westwood when explaining her thinking behind the 1980 Pirates collection. "The Pirate would be colourful – and go out into the street and plunder the world." ('Westwood', *South Bank Show* London Weekend Television 1990.) It is not just chutzpah at play here for the Westwood wearer does plunder, but the booty is the emotional satisfaction of their dress or appearance and the stealing of their audiences highly charges emotional response to that appearance.

Flugel describes clothing as protection "against the general unfriendliness of the world as a whole" or "as a reassurance against the lack of love." (Flugel 1930, p 77). Flugel goes on to link this function to 'womb fantasies - returning to the warm, an enveloping and protecting home.' (Flugel 1930, p. 77). Barnard relates this to the feeling we have for "a favourite garment" where "one is not actually protected from traffic accidents or the ill will of others, but such items may make one feel protected." (Barnard 2002, p. 52). This is another area of interest when looking at the Westwood wearer, especially the notion of protection against the general unfriendliness of the world as a whole. Westwood's clothes appear free and fanciful and the wearer completely selfish and alien (although personally comforted.) The alienation is not slight, as if wearing a coloured hat but the rest of the outfit recognisable



and friendly, but rather the whole outfit appears to communicate on an anti-friendly level, heavily utilising colour, proportion, silhouette, textiles and combination of garments, wrapping the wearer in an armour of self enjoyment, protecting against the standardisation and relative boredom of more identifiable fashion outfits (and communications).

In Grayson Perry's documentary, *Why Men Wear Frocks*, part of the documentary focused on the beginnings of cross-dressing as a trend, (although considered subversive and essentially a secretive trend) in Victorian times. Perry felt that for Victorian transvestites, "It has to be about something more. It had to be about the emotions which the clothes gave you access to." (Perry, *Why Men Wear Frocks*, Channel 4, 2005.) Again the emotions of clothing appear to be the driving force behind choice. Perry summarised the documentary by saying: "Walk down any high street in Britain and you'll be hard pushed to find visions of femininity to latch onto. Perhaps transvestites are the last Victorians? The last people who really believe in the symbolic dimension of women's clothes." (Perry, *Why Men Wear Frocks*, Sky 2005). The time frame may be different but the sentiment is the same. We live in a time where our lives are consumed with work, comfort, in order to move as fast as possible and constantly being pressurised to standardise everything we do. So, is it any wonder that some people want to "dress up." and begin to escape their social bondage.

### **Semiotics or selfish antics? historical reference and the possible breakdown in semiotic exchange**

'Taste and intelligence go together. It's not possible to have taste without intelligence, and it's not possible to have intelligence unless you have a bent towards the unorthodox.' (Westwood, South bank Show, London Weekend Television, 1990.)

In the *Why Men Wear Frocks* documentary, Perry talks to Nick Faulkes, author of *Last of the Dandies* about what was the desire in being a Dandy for him, "...its fancy dress. For me it was the past." Under this subject matter the Westwood wearer takes centre stage.

The work of Vivienne Westwood is well known for its referencing of period dress. Many of the pieces take their principal construction from historical garments however Westwood will re-invent period or traditional techniques which when applied to a garment, the outcome is

modern and the garment when compared to most other contemporary fashion appears to be invented and new to the eye. Susan North, Curator of eighteenth century dress at The Victoria and Albert Museum has describes Westwood work in this area as being “on an entirely different level from any other designer.” It is not only the area of historic dress which has been utilised but also anything which can be labelled as traditional, especially when relating to British traditions in dress, costume and uniform, especially the recognisable facets from The British Empire. With regard to Westwood’s use of historical reference and even re-utilising her own earlier design, she has said, “it’s like I have a lot of food in the fridge, and I can just keep making different dinners.” (Westwood, *Clothes Show*, BBC, September 1991.) It is not purely the fabric or the garment that is being referenced, but also the social values of the period too. It feels dangerously naïve to propose that clothing can be used to alter or at least promote improvements in social behaviour and values however; there is evidence that encourages further exploration.

In the Gillian Greenwood documentary on the life and works of Vivienne Westwood, Westwood claims, “Everything I do I start from an intellectual point. As far as I know, I’m the only designer who really cares so much to analyse what they do in broader cultural terms. That’s the only way I can stimulate my intelligence – I believe that we live in a time which is uncivilised, it’s less civilised than Pagan Greece.” (Westwood, *South Bank Show*, London Weekend Television, 1990.) Jasper Conran has described her use of fabrics and cut in a contemporary market as having a “charmingly innocent sexual charge – naïve innocence.” (Conran, *South Bank Show*, London Weekend Television, 1990.) This is much more than a technical description of clothing but rather more of an attitude, from which cultural references can begin to be formed. He goes on to comment, “Her use of tweeds is so unobvious; you get that slight perverse quality to the garment. She talks about England in her clothes, she talks about the state which we as a nation are in, she talks about the world, she talks about class... you know, she has a wide vocabulary.” (Conran, *South Bank Show*, London Weekend Television, 1990.) These elements are a major force in the feeling of ‘dressing up.’ With just the change of an outfit one can become a nineteenth century pirate or be sitting for an eighteenth century portrait, become a character in Proust’s *A la Recherche du Temps*

*Perdu*, Elizabeth I or even a Pagan Nymph running around the agora. Surely such possibilities through clothing must be considered as life altering or at the very least as protection “against the general unfriendliness of the world as a whole.”

With Westwood’s Autumn/Winter 2005/06 Gold Label collection, entitled PROPAGANDA, the Active Resistance to Propaganda: Culture vs. Dogma manifesto was launched on her own web site. The manifesto introduces ideas such as, “You get out of life what you put in and that real experience of the world involves thinking.” (Westwood, V. (2005). AR. Retrieved December 20,2005, from [www.viviennewestwood.com](http://www.viviennewestwood.com).) Supporting the argument that the experience of wearing Westwood’s clothes is a highly personal and self satisfying process, the manifesto goes on to say, “You need to go deep in order to understand who you are, what the world is and how things could be better – culture can only be acquired by self-education.” (Westwood, V. (2005). AR. Retrieved December 20,2005, from [www.viviennewestwood.com](http://www.viviennewestwood.com).)

There are three main points that Westwood wants to get across:

- i Separate the idea of culture from the anthropological version.
- ii Make the point that scepticism is the underlying factor for ideas, including the idea of progress. Our culture is stagnant. We need to question everything.
- iii Tell young people that every time they e.g. look up a word in a dictionary, e.g. look at painting instead of magazines etc. they are thinking and therefore part of a resistance movement.  
([www.viviennewestwood.com](http://www.viviennewestwood.com) 2005)

Contemporary material culture could be described as very limited in reference and meaning when compared to the texts that are available through the clothes of Vivienne Westwood. A lot of knowledge needs to be acquired before syntagmatic and paradigmatic signs can be fully identified and appreciated. Barnard refers to the usual example of a menu when exploring signs and signifiers. In this example, the syntagmatic difference is the difference between courses and the paradigmatic difference is the difference between the items available for each course; prawn cocktail, soup or melon as starter etc. Barnard points out that ‘the reason some people perceive foreign cuisines as daunting is often the result of not knowing the syntagmatic and

paradigmatic differences between the items on the menu and wanting to avoid ordering the equivalent of chips and custard.’ (Barnard 2002: 89). Using this example to consider how Westwood clothes are perceived, to the mass culture that are heavily embedded in the mass consumption of fashion, the Westwood wearer can easily be mistaken as wearing chips and custard!

Others have commented on this breakdown in communication and the non-acceptance of Westwood’s clothes. “There is a certain generation I suppose who would look at some of her [Westwood’s] most amazing and inventive clothes and simply dismiss them, dismiss them out of hand and not be able to see what she’s doing and be quite intolerant about her work.” (Valerie Mendes, *The South Bank Show*, London Weekend Television, 1990.) Possibly this battle of sign and the relation to society was best described in Alix Sharkry’s piece for *The Observer Magazine*; “For her, clothes should intensify and refine the wearer’s sense of physical presence; provoke a reaction, change the atmosphere with sexual and political tension; they should directly alter the physical reality of the world around them. Clearly, this kind of clothing poses questions and challenges us to explore, to consider the unknown. It can make us uncomfortable, this fashion that works like a drug that alters our state of consciousness.” (Sharkey, *Life*, *The Observer Magazine* 2001: 15.)

### **Conclusion**

It can easily be seen how the Western fashion industry has evolved and is currently in a position where mass production and mass consumerism is the driving force behind each season’s output. As with many other industries, mass standardisation is the key to developing products that successfully sell in this atmosphere of mass consumerism. However, this standardisation has led to a stagnation of possibility and this has infiltrated so deeply that popular culture is feeling and reflecting this effect. As the standardisation of dress greatens then the value of the messages at play in the semiotic exchange has become narrower and narrower, to a point where with so many people all looking the same, and now with a greater majority than ever perpetuating this existence, to not submit is to commit heresy.

Of course the collections of Vivienne Westwood are one of the places where clothing with a different direction, charged with passion, history, intelligence and enjoyment can be found. The ideas and content charged

within Westwood's clothes are all areas, which are no longer held in esteem by current culture and therefore they are either not known or not fully understood. These elements within a person's dress have the effect of making the reception of the semiotic communicative exchange a very alien experience. So alien that on occasions, certain individuals can feel so alarmed by the received messages and level of difference that they can feel threatened so feel the need to attack. Despite this the Westwood wearer continues to fuel their desire and wear the clothes. The reason for this defiance appears to be because the semiotic output sent from the wearer and received back by the same wearer is so strong that the opinions and concerns of others pale into insignificance compared to the joy and delight, which the clothes are providing. These people are dressing for themselves.

So how has this situation occurred where people actively opt out of the traditional understanding of semiotics in terms of fashion as communication in favour of purely self-indulgent enjoyment? If we are all looking the same then we are no longer communicating individuality, and interesting, differentiating aspects about ourselves. The person sat next to us on the tube could be Mr Middle Class, a mass murder or a television celebrity, but the semiotic exchange will be the same from each of them. Since the nineteen fifties, youth has always been looked to in order to see diversion in cultural phenomena. Historically this has shown itself in various forms but presently we find ourselves in an environment that has no cultural phenomena with a visual identity for people to belong to.

'We live in a world where there is little attention to beauty, where people's choices are foisted upon them by mass marketing.' (Piper, Metro, 17 November 2005: 15)

'Consumers are like roaches – you spray them and spray them and they get immune after a while.' (Klein, 2000)

One clear area of social interest presently is the obsession with celebrity, but who are these celebrities? The winners of reality TV programmes are now our most loved celebrities, but they are ordinary people and appear, communicating identical semiotic exchanges as any other person walking down a neighbouring high street. Of course, there are still people of credible celebrity status (formed through a developed body of work or artistic and academic recognition) but with the public's

obsession to know everything about them, the paparazzi follow their every move. Newspapers are filled with pictures of these stars in non-celebrity activities, so we see them in the supermarket or pushing a pushchair through the park and wearing ordinary (non-red carpet) clothing, so again the level of acceptable and mass recognisable semiotic communication is enforced.

There is an interesting theory to be derived from these issues. Could it be that the singular level of semiotic exchange has become so dominant that the mass population are refusing or unable to accept anything else and so everything has to be brought to this level? So with the case of the celebrity, ordinary people appearing in talent show and reality programmes are being raised to a level of celebrity, providing positive benchmarks for this level and real celebrities are most interesting when being portrayed as being very ordinary. This levelling out of everything is supported by Neil Boorman, editor of the London lifestyle publication *Good for Nothing* when he stated, "It's clear that we are heading towards a sterile monoculture but there's no point moaning about it. We need to rebuild a culture for ourselves." (Boorman; 2005.) So how do we rebuild a culture for ourselves? Maybe we begin by exploring the question; that if we are in a monoculture, who are we dressing for? Obviously the high street is providing clothing that will automatically put us in the safe zone for communication. With a safety net of knowing that whatever the decision is, we will still communicate 'friend', could it be that we are making purely selfish decisions about what makes us feel the most positive when we are wearing the items? Are we dressing for ourselves? This begins to challenge further (or at least add a new layer of understanding to) the traditional conception of semiotics in fashion as communication.

So we could already be dressing for ourselves, just as the Westwood wearer is. This could be the beginning of the building of a new culture for us. As this trend progresses with time, perhaps people will become so enthralled with their own happiness through dress that they begin to unconsciously stray away from the safety of the high streets mass communicated messages and begin to find new possibilities for themselves. This could progress to a stage where again there is multiple choice and the semiotic communication is different and individual in every instance. The fashion industry of course will have to adapt to this

and the required level of adaptation would be severe. Choice would have to return to the high street. The opportunity for the independent retailer would return as more items but in smaller numbers will be required.

Of course, such radical change will take time, however it is worth noting that there are already fashion companies who have never moved away from this self-selection, self-gratification and self-celebration. Vivienne Westwood has always delivered clothes that have been much more than just the latest fashion trends but are to her customers, life enhancing devices that they would not be without. Already for Westwood's customers, the idea of joining the ranks of the mass consumer is as David Piper (a contemporary Dandy) describes, "unappealing to someone with even the smallest amount of sophistication." Maybe one day, Westwood's Active Resistance manifesto will not sound like idyllic thinking and as out of reach as it is being currently received. At present culture may be stagnant but perhaps as we begin to drift away from a mass marketed atmosphere, this drifting will create the first ripples of movement towards regeneration. Already there are many people who owe a percentage of their happiness and civility to a fashion designer, of all things.

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