

La Dernière Mode: Blogging fashion

Michelle Webb Fandrich

Abstract

The advent of the internet has democratized the consumption of fashion in a number of ways – whether through e-tailing and online auction phenomena such as eBay or Yoox.com, daily detailed coverage of fashion weeks throughout the world available through a number of sites (including those linked to magazines such as *Vogue* and *Elle*), or through the blog-o-sphere where all interested in commenting on the latest modes and mores of fashion are given voice. This last category is of particular interest to those looking to the future of fashion history resources. But what place does the plethora of fashion related blogs have within the greater structure of fashion history literature? Can we find today's Mallarmé among the bloggers of the internet's many fashion-centric sites? Does 2005's Anina.net sponsored conference on fashion blogging herald the acceptance of fashion blogging as a mode of critique and consumption? This paper examines the place of publications such as Mallarme's *La Dernière Mode* among accepted fashion history literature and attempts to place blogs such as *gofugyourself.com* and *almostgirl.coffeespoons.org* as well as many others within a similar context of value for contemporary fashion historians.

Introduction

In 2006, the first recorded attempt to classify the current phenomenon of the 'fashion blog' appeared on the Wikipedia online encyclopedia and Internet portal (Fashion blog, 2007). This step marked a clear acknowledgement by the larger community of online content developers that the process of understanding the fashion blog, like any new concept or occurrence, written or otherwise, must begin with the development of a system of classification. In this early foray into fashion-focused 'blogs', or online journals, the contributing writers looked to the originator of the

Keywords:

fashion blogs,

fashion criticism,

fashion on the Internet

fashion blog, the 'blogger', for guidance and expertise. This initial attempt may well serve the needs of the online community at large; however, it does not suit the particular needs of the fashion historian.

The usefulness of the written word to convey fashion ideas is by no means a settled debate. From Cunningham to Barthes and, more recently, Lou Taylor, the benefits and drawbacks of analyzing fashion through the filter of the written word have been examined minutely. While this paper cannot hope to resolve the existing disagreements over the validity of written fashion commentary, it will outline a proposed system for classifying the fashion blog for scholarly research.

History and context

Use of written works in the study of fashion

Among the primary arguments against the use of the written word in fashion research, whether fictional or otherwise, is the presence of bias. Regardless of the author, political, social and situational biases shape the written word. However, despite the validity of this concern, the nature of fashion precludes the total elimination of written accounts. An unworn garment is naturally devoid of an element essential to its understanding, the experience of wearing it in a specific time and place. Written sources provide evocative insight into what that experience might have been like. Biases still must be identified and used to weigh the validity and relevance of the material.

On initial examination, the similarities in structure and tone between fashion blogs and written works published in a more conventional manner are striking. As with print fashion periodicals, fashion bloggers adhere to the seasonal timeline in their generation of content. Bloggers combine their examinations of current fashion trends with reports on celebrity-focused fashion in order to demonstrate the power or resonance of the trends being discussed – a practice embraced by most fashion magazines. Many bloggers also provided critical commentary of the collected works of well-known designers, mirroring the approach of publications like *Vogue*, which often presents retrospectives of designers considered important by its editorial staff.

However, the editorial freedom found in fashion blogs is unparalleled in the world of traditional fashion periodicals, leading quickly to a point at which the cumulative weight of this independent view point outweighs the aforementioned similarities. In order to place fashion blogs in context

with the larger realm of fashion criticism, it is necessary to examine the foundations upon which the fashion blogging phenomenon is built.

Lou Taylor's *The Study of Dress History*

While the technology that facilitated the evolution of blogging was not developed until well into the 20th century, the true origin of the fashion blog can, in fact, be traced back much further than the computer age. As early as the 1700s, civilian fashion observers dovetailed descriptions of current trends with editorial criticism. And then, as now, not all the criticism was favorable. In an era of clear class distinctions, fashion writers often aimed their sharpest words at the increasing access of the working class to high fashion, whether through the acquisition of the lady of the house's hand-me-down dresses or, later, the early forms of "fast fashion" made possible by the industrial revolution (Taylor, 2002, pp. 93-97).

In her book, *The Study of Dress History*, Professor Lou Taylor addresses the same issue in relation to these early fashion critiques that scholars must apply to the current blogging trend: How relevant are these first-hand civilian accounts? As Professor Taylor notes, differing personal interpretations of the same trend can result in vastly conflicting accounts. Such is the case with contemporary criticism of the clothing worn by the British serving class in the 18th century, who, depending on who was doing the reporting, were either extremely fashion conscious or simply practical, wearing their mistresses' castoff clothing (2002, pp. 94-97). However, these editorial accounts need not be dismissed simply because they lack consistency. Rather, they highlight the importance of evaluating current editorial criticism within a larger historical and visual context. As Taylor notes, "fashion acts as a symbol of social mood" (2002, p. 98). One can easily make the same case for fashion editorializing.

Threads in fashion writing from the 19th to the 21st century

Mallarmé

Although current fashion blogs can be said to be offshoots of mainstream fashion commentary throughout the past several centuries, their direct lineage can be plotted more precisely as originating in 1874, with the first publication of the French poet Stéphane Mallarmé's fashion magazine, *La Dernière Mode*. Here we see for the first time, not

just one, but all of the stylistic ingredients found in the current fashion blogging trend: independence from established fashion authority; publication under one or more evocative pseudonyms; and a blend of fashion reporting and critique, with the style of the writing sharing the stage with its subject (Furbank & Cain, 2004).

At the time he released *La Dernière Mode*'s first sample issue, Mallarmé was at the peak of his popularity as a poet, having already published *Tristesse d'été*, *L'Azur*, and *L'Après-midi d'un faune* (Furbank & Cain, 2004, p. 5). As the publication's sole author and editor, he adopted a collection of pseudonyms for the various editorial columns, a practice that many modern bloggers, both within the realm of fashion and beyond, have unconsciously emulated. The two nom de plumes that served as the most direct predecessors to today's fashion blogger were Marguerite de Ponty, who offered fashion criticism and advice, and Miss Satin, an allegedly British contributor who covered the Paris fashion houses (2004, p. 5).

In Marguerite de Ponty, Mallarmé assumed the tone of perhaps a particularly fashionable aunt, both reporting on the latest styles and offering her recommendations, as she demonstrates in her column about hats for the upcoming autumn season in the magazine's second issue (2004, pp. 51-53). While it can be tempting to disregard Mallarmé's writings as social commentary or satire, irrelevant to the study of fashion, it would be a mistake to arbitrarily set *La Dernière Mode* aside without examining the work in the context of known fashion trends of the era. Here the magazine holds up to objective scrutiny. When Marguerite de Ponty predicts the upcoming season's must-have garment, "the tunic of steel or blued-steel jet...knitted, in black, grey or blue silk worked with pearls...somewhat long in front and very short behind"(2004, p. 52), Mallarmé provides a historically accurate description of contemporary style.

In *La Dernière Mode*'s first 'sample' issue, there is much to suggest that Mallarmé presented an insider's eye to fashion. In his first writings as Marguerite de Ponty, he astutely notes that August is, "Too late to speak of summer fashions and too soon to speak of winter ones (or even autumn ones)" (2004, p. 21). He then goes on to predict that, "we should expect an absolute revolution in the Bustle," although, "People claim that its day is over, the waist is no longer needing its support" (2004, p.

22). Mallarmé may have been lacking in an appropriate fashion pedigree, but his ‘prophesy’ proved to be highly accurate.

Mallarmé’s legacy as fashion critic was marred primarily by its brevity. After publishing eight issues over the course of four months in 1874, Mallarmé lost control of the magazine when the publisher, Charles Wendelen, turned the publication over to Baronne Lomaria, who both lowered and broadened its scope, creating a more general publication for middleclass housewives. *La Dernière Mode* ceased publication entirely in the Spring of 1875 (2004, p. 5).

Fashion bloggers of note

In the early years of the 21st century, Mallarmé’s experiment was reborn in high tech style with the evolution of the fashion blog. The accessibility of the Internet and the ubiquitousness of camera phones made it inevitable that control of fashion news and commentary would spread beyond established publications like *Vogue* and *Women’s Wear Daily* and into the computers of this new breed of fashion journalist. As Laird Borelli notes in his book, *Net Mode: Web Fashion Now*, “this genre of fashion site [when compared to e-commerce and “vanity” sites or blogs incorporated into a designer’s marketing Website] most obviously exhibits the all-access, democratic bent of the Web” (2002, p. 8). In 2006, *Women’s Wear Daily* estimated the number of fashion and shopping-related blogs to be approximately two million (Corcoran, 2006). However, the existence of a fashion-related Internet site does not guarantee its scholastic relevance, and the number of truly influential fashion blogs likely stands at less than 20.

One such blog is *Go Fug Yourself* (www.gofugyourself.typepad.com), an L.A.-based blog whose authors, Jessica Morgan and Heather Cocks, chronicle perceived celebrity fashion missteps. It would be easy to dismiss this site as just another fan tabloid. However, the blog has garnered worldwide attention, earning it a front page article in the *Wall Street Journal* in September 2005, as well as mention as one of *Time Magazine’s* 50 Coolest Websites of 2005 and *Entertainment Weekly’s* Favorite 25 Entertainment Sites in 2006. Its narrow focus – lambasting celebrity fashion – limits the blog as a resource for fashion commentary, but, even so, its influence must be noted. In the past year, Morgan and Cocks paired with New York Magazine to blog live from New York fashion week (Dodes, 2006) and the Academy Awards red carpet.

She She Me (shesheme.com) represents an area in which fashion blogs blur the borders that separate blogs from online magazines and retailers. *She She Me* features a self-contained fashion blog (shesheblog.com), which focuses on answering fashion questions from readers. However, it also encompasses evergreen online editorial content and an e-tail store. Sites such as this demonstrate the importance of establishing clear categories for evaluating both pure blogs and blended online fashion portals, which combine features of the magazine, the retail environment and the blog.

Sites like *Anina.net* represent a further challenge for scholars in the evaluation and classification of fashion blogs. Its author, Anina, is a model and multimedia artist, and the site exists not only as an online journal, but also as a vehicle for self promotion. While the site meets some criteria for classification as a fashion blog, its author's multiple motivations within the worlds of fashion and art must be considered. *Anina.net*, and other sites like it, has already generated concern from within the fashion industry itself. When determining the guest list for its clients' Bryant Park fashion shows, the public relations firm LaForce + Stevens eliminated any bloggers whose sites contained photos of themselves to weed out self-promoters (Dodes, 2006). The rule seems arbitrary on its face, as established fashion magazines like *Vogue* regularly feature photos of contributing writers, and further demonstrates the need for a thorough system of categorization.

Emi Guner's site, *letterstomarcjacobs.blogspot.com*, is an example of a blog that holds true to the online journal origins of the blog, which is an abbreviation for web log. This site blends fashion commentary with personal essay. Each blog is addressed to designer Marc Jacobs, but Guner doesn't entirely confine herself to fashion topics. This form of blog is highly personal, and the biases are more readily apparent than they might be in a commercial blog, which creates a fresh challenge for fashion scholars since bloggers like Guner may shine a bright light on a very small issue of fashion, such as Guner's ongoing commentary about the absence of couture shoes for bunion sufferers. Consideration must also be given to the personal essayist's motivations. According to Guner, her blog, which now features more than 300 letters to Marc Jacobs, started out as an experiment to find out how long it would take the designer to notice her. "Two hundred letters from me and none from him make me look ridiculous. At the same time, the scale of it makes it

so ridiculous that I have to go on, just for the hell of it. I created a monster. Now I have to feed it” (Gifford, 2006). When essentially private musings are made public, it can be difficult to gauge where the work shifts from commenting on the outside fashion world to ruminating on the author’s internal world.

Style Bubble (stylebubble.typepad.com) represents a purer, from an academic standpoint, example of a fashion blog. It features the distinct voice of a single author, London-based Susanna Lau under the pseudonym Susie Bubble, who takes many of the fashion photos herself, as well as providing commentary. *Style Bubble* contains no advertising and is not an e-tail space. The depth and breadth of her fashion commentary, and the scope of her readership, have garnered her attention from the fashion industry. Lau was present at Spring 2007 fashion week in Paris and secured access to the Jean Charles de Castelbajac and Lanvin shows, demonstrating that designers are beginning to take bloggers seriously as members of the press.

Lau isn’t the first blogger invited inside the fashion tents. In September 2006, approximately 40 bloggers were given official press passes to New York fashion week in Bryant Park. Blogs that secured invitations to Bryant Park shows included www.bagtrends.com, FashionTrends.com, PerezHilton.com, [Blogging Project Runway](http://BloggingProjectRunway.com), and [Fashion Addict Diary](http://FashionAddictDiary.com) (Dodes, 2006). The immediacy of blogging (bloggers often post stories within hours of an event) means that the public’s first view of upcoming trends can potentially be a blog rather than an established newspaper or fashion publication.

Categorization and analysis

Identifying a workable system for categorizing fashion blogs begins with a two-step process: 1) identify and eliminate online fashion content that does not meet the minimum criteria for acceptance as a true “blog,” and 2) create discernable benchmarks, which will assist the researcher in evaluating the content of an accepted fashion blog.

Identifying and eliminating faux fashion blogs

The term ‘blog’ first came into usage in 1997 as an abbreviation of web log and was intended as an identifying moniker for online journals that had begun appearing on the Internet in increasing numbers (Kline &

Burstein, 2005, pp. xi-xiii). It can therefore be extrapolated that a true fashion blog is an online blend of a journal and scrapbook, presented from the viewpoint of one or perhaps two authors and representing an independent voice in the realm of fashion.

While the intended meaning of the word 'blog' is not in dispute, it's important to recognize that the increasing popularity and 'street cred' of the term has incentivized a variety of individuals and organizations to co-opt the term and stretch its definition beyond usefulness. For this and other reasons, it's not possible to rely on self-identification by content creators. Rather, it's important to create methods to sift through material identified as a blog and eliminate those sites that have misappropriated the term. To that end, there are two categories of content that can be used to eliminate these 'faux fashion blogs'.

Blogs generated by or for commercial entities

Googling the term 'fashion blog' will identify numerous true fashion blogs; however, it will also point the user toward *Glamour Magazine's* 'blog' on the first page of results. *Vogue* also employs blogs in its online portal. However, while these chunks of content mirror the organization by time utilized in a blog, they are created by paid staff writers based on the needs of the publication and cannot be accepted as legitimate online journals for the purposes of this discussion.

Also excluded from consideration are 'blogs' generated by established fashion designers as part of the brand website, such as Christian Lacroix's online fashion diary (Borelli, 2004, pp. 30-31). While these designer journals provide a potentially valuable insight into the minds of fashion creators, they cannot be said to be either independent or unbiased criticism, and, as such, they must be eliminated from consideration in this context.

Copied or stolen content

Since blog content is, by its nature, independent and unregulated, a significant amount of plagiarism exists within the blogging community. This theft of pre-existing content is generally not malicious in nature; rather, a blogger seeks to provide his or her readership with accurate, up-to-date information, and many bloggers choose to simply locate the required information and then 'copy and paste' it into their own websites, with or without proper credit. While the incorporation of

copied or stolen content doesn't eliminate sites from the overall blog category, it presents an insurmountable obstacle for researchers in that source material on such sites has been contaminated, and it may not be possible to completely discern original content from copied material. For this reason, blogs that contain more than an occasional instance of copied or stolen content must be discounted as a relevant fashion blog.

Spamlinks/Link farms

As with any popular term, 'blog' has attracted the attention of viral and 'spam' marketers, who incorporate the term into site keywords in order to lure potential customers to commercial websites. Additionally, individual bloggers often create lists of favorite links or, growing bored with the daily nature of blogging, convert an existing blog into a list of weblinks to sites of interest to their prior readers. While these "link farms" may point the way to relevant blogs, they do not, in and of themselves, meet the journaling content requirements for classification as a blog.

What makes a fashion blog?

Once unusable or irrelevant fashion content has been excluded, it is necessary to identify benchmarks to further hone the definition of a usable blog. The system of classification set forth here is generated from the perspective of a fashion historian and is, therefore, limited to the needs and conditions of a fashion history research methodology. Definitions of usable blogs for economic studies, sociological examinations of fashion and other topics will be left to researchers with relevant expertise.

As Lou Taylor noted in *The Study of Dress History*, researchers must always use a critical gaze when making use of contemporary written resources for the discussion of fashion. Having established a clear link between the work of Stéphane Mallarmé in *La Dernière Mode* to that of 21st century fashion bloggers, I have used the current scholarship on *La Dernière Mode* as a model and identified four benchmarks for evaluating fashion blogs: motivation, content focus, originality and immediacy.

Motivation

Although *La Dernière Mode* was published not by Mallarmé but by Wendelen (Furbank & Cain, 2004, p. 4.), recent scholarship contends that the impetus for the author lay not with the subscribing patrons but

within his own imagination. His interest in decorative arts is well documented, and certain artistic embellishments, such as Mallarmé's reference to pre-existing issues of the magazine that had never been written and descriptions of engravings that did not exist (Furbank & Cain, 2004, pp. 6-7.), point to a wide degree of creative license that was not beholden to commercial demand. This internal creative compass is a feature that many fashion bloggers share. It is an independently motivated approach to fashion criticism that exists beyond the editorial reach of paid magazine writers, who must consider external demands, such as product placement, existing or anticipated relationships with advertisers, and other motivations inherent in a profit-driven fashion publication.

Since this independence from commercial pressures broadens the scope of blog content, the personal expression of the blog author is a key feature in evaluating the validity of its content. The relative purity of the fashion blog rests on its ability to stand alone as an independent entity, outside of the auspices of traditional fashion periodicals.

Content focus

Looking more deeply into *La Dernière Mode*, the inclusion of subjects outside the world of fashion must be considered when reviewing fashion blogs. In the 19th century, as continues to be the case today, it was standard practice to include theatrical review, menu planning suggestions and entertainment news in fashion publications. While additional topics were covered, however, the majority of Mallarmé's writing in the magazine was centered upon 19th century Parisian fashion. This primary-focus approach to content is a significant feature to consider when reviewing fashion blogs of the 21st century. While the journal nature of the blogging format lends itself to the inclusion of significantly more personal information than actual criticism, fashion blogs must be evaluated based on their prioritization of fashion over other subjects.

Originality

The originality inherent in *La Dernière Mode* stems primarily from Mallarmé's use of the fashion magazine model to generate a new world within the magazine. He gives that world a back story in the form of editions that had never been written and engravings that had never

been drawn. He then populates that world with distinct personalities (Furbank & Cain, 2004, pp. 5-7), all while remaining true to the purpose of a fashion publication of the day.

While 21st century fashion bloggers should not be held to this high a standard (Mallarmé was, after all, an internationally recognized poet), originality in both content and perspective, should be used as a tool to evaluate the relevance of fashion blogs. Moving beyond the obvious plagiarism discussed in the previous section, some bloggers distill knowledge gathered from other websites without adding personal critique or original content. While this may function adequately as a means to disseminate knowledge, it does not add to the collective well of fashion awareness. For that reason, scholars must consider, not just the originality of actual words, but the originality of ideas contained in a particular blog in order to evaluate its relevance for study.

Immediacy

In this final category, we move beyond the Mallarmé model and into the world of fashion criticism in the 'Information Age'. Perhaps the most valuable aspect of the fashion blog is its ability to deliver immediate criticism and response to current fashion events. Fashion itself is a fast moving phenomenon, and the blog is uniquely situated to keep abreast of rapidly changing cycles and trends. The filters inherent in the relatively slow editorial process of the fashion magazine are removed entirely, generating genuine reactions that haven't been tempered by time or multiple layers of editing. Leading from that concept, blogs must be evaluated not just on their ability to report on fashion trends, but on their in-the-moment reactions to those trends.

Defining the potential of fashion blogs as source material for contemporary fashion history

The fashion blog has evolved into a new expression of the 'fast fashion' mass availability of fashion consumables. In the same way that a dress can rapidly move from runway to retail rack, fashion criticism now has the capacity to be disseminated at speeds heretofore unimagined.

Fashion blogs provide real-time insight into the immediate experience of fashion by the independent observer, potentially untainted by commercial interest. This presents the scholastic community with a unique opportunity to analyze directly the fashion experience of the

general population. The limited avenues available in traditional fashion media create another opportunity for contribution from fashion bloggers, who can provide coverage of designers, not yet recognized by the fashion establishment, who may have a future impact on the history of fashion. This creates the possibility, if not the likelihood, that future fashion historians will have access to earlier materials by influential designers than they might have under the traditional system. Even if a particular designer does not rise to popular acclaim, the work of bloggers may provide important evidence about fashion development, explain influences acting on the creation of fashion, and highlight the operation of the fashion system from an external vantage point.

Conclusion

That fashion bloggers will have a lasting impact on the world of fashion is a foregone conclusion. Fashion blogs must be recognized; there is simply the question of how they are to be evaluated as resources. In order to fully utilize the fashion blog, a system of archiving these living documents must be developed, and historians must then establish a formal method for evaluating those documents for accuracy and relevance. While there have been several attempts to organize fashion web content in general (Borelli, 2004) and fashion blogs specifically (Fashion Blog, 2007), these systems have been developed for a general audience, rather than the fashion historian. As Laird Borelli notes in his book, *Net Mode: Web Fashion Now*, notes, “there are no agreed rules for archiving or recording Web design, despite its importance and ubiquitousness” (2004).

In many ways, fashion and the Internet occupy connecting spheres. The study of fashion history is ultimately the attempt to anchor a thousand continually shifting ideas and realities in order to define a phenomenon that is inherently changeable. Recognizing that fashion flows and evolves from the designer’s conception to the realization of the final garment offers historians a unique analogy from which to interpret and appreciate the similarly fluid resources offered by the fashion blog.

As researchers, we must not turn away from the fashion blog phenomenon. Rather we must continue to evaluate these resources and generate discussion within the fashion history community about methodologies for the use of these potentially valuable resources.

References

- Borrelli, L. (2002), *Net Mode: Web Fashion Now* (New York: Thames & Hudson)
- Dodes, R. (2006, September 12), 'Bloggers get under the tent', *The Wall Street Journal Online*
- Corcoran, C.T. (2006, February 6), 'The blogs that took over the tents', *Womens Wear Daily*
- Fashion blog. (2007, March 8), in *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia* Retrieved March 9, 2007, from:
http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Fashion_blog&oldid=113503023
- Furbank, P.N. & Cain, A.M. (2004), *Mallarmé on Fashion: A Translation of the Fashion Magazine La Dernière Mode with Commentary* (New York: Berg)
- Gifford, K. (2006, October), 'Marc their words', *Soma*
- Kline, D. & Burstein, D. (2005), *blog: how the newest media revolution is changing politics, business, and culture* (New York: CDS Books)
- Taylor, L. (2002), *The Study of Dress History* (New York: Manchester University Press)

Acknowledgements

This paper would not have been possible without the helpful collaboration of Mary-Beth Brophy.

About the author

Michelle Webb Fandrich is an independent scholar and appraiser of fine and decorative arts in Santa Monica, California, USA. Her areas of expertise include contemporary fashion and the history of the California fashion design industry.

mwfandrich@costext.com

2118 Wilshire Boulevard, Suite 994
Santa Monica, CA 90403
USA