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TEXTILE AND TEXT: FASHION AND LITERATURE IN THE CONTEXT OF HIGH AND LOW CULTURE

ТЕКСТИЛЬ І ТЕКСТ: МОДА ТА ЛІТЕРАТУРА У КОНТЕКСТІ ВИСОКОЇ ТА НИЗЬКОЇ КУЛЬТУРИ

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As the title implies the article describes the artistic fields of fashion and literature in the context of high and low culture. It is spoken in detail about the historical circumstances of the separation of culture into high and low as a means of establishing class distinctions during the second half of the 19th – early 20th centuries. The study examines the commercialization of popular literature, the massification of the classics, and the different nature of engagement with culture between classes as factors contributing to the high/low divide following industrialization.

Much attention is given to the emergence of fashion as a direct result of industrialization and mass production and their implications on fashion as a class-signaling tool. It is reported that women's fashion in the second half of the 19th – early 20th centuries reflected anti-industrial narratives observed in prominent artistic movements of the time. The fact that fashion should be discussed as a legitimate artistic product is stressed. By acknowledging the significance of the decorative function of clothes and context-dependent perception of the artistic value tendencies of simplification and de-accentuation of fashion products are refuted, leveling it with other branches of art.

It is shown that culture's class-based distinction is still prevalent today despite a tendency toward omnivorous consumption of culture among the privileged groups. It is stressed that the modern mass culture encourages overconsumption due to its reliance on rapid trend turnover observed in mass fashion and literature not comparable with the historical critiques of the commodification of culture. Omnivorousness can contribute to the sustainable consumption of both fashion and literature by prioritizing mindful and critical engagement with culture.

Key words: fashion, literature, high and low culture, industrialization, fashion as art, cultural omnivore and univore.

Відповідно до заголовку стаття описує мистецькі сфери моди та літератури у контексті високої та низької культури. У роботі детально йдеться про історичні обставини поділу культури на високу і низьку як засіб встановлення класових відмінностей у другій половині 19-го – на початку 20-го століття. Дане дослідження розглядає комерціалізацію популярної літератури, масифікацію класичних творів, а також – природу взаємодії з культурою між різними класами як фактори, що посприяли розриву між високою і низькою культурою після початку індустріалізації.

Велика увага приділяється виникненню моди як прямого результату індустріалізації та масового виробництва, та їх впливу на моду як інструмент позначення класової приналежності. У статті повідомляється, що жіноча мода другої половини 19-го – початку 20-го століть відображала антиіндустріальні наративи, які спостерігалися у чільних мистецьких рухах того часу. Наголошується на тому, що моду слід обговорювати як легітимний мистецький продукт. Через визнання значущості декоративної функції одягу та контекстного сприйняття художньої цінності спростовуються тенденції спрощення та деакцентування продуктів моди, підносячи їх на один рівень з іншими галузями мистецтва.

У роботі демонструється, що класове розрізнення культури все ще поширене сьогодні, незважаючи на тенденцію до «всєядного» споживання культури серед привілейованих груп. Також наголошується на тому, що сучасна масова культура заохочує надмірне споживання через свою залежність від швидкого обороту тенденцій, які спостерігаються в масовій моді та літературі, що не порівняти з історичною критикою комодифікації культури. Відповідно, культурна «всєядність» може сприяти більш відповідальному споживанню як моди, так і літератури, віддаючи пріоритет усвідомленому та критичному споживанню культури.

Ключові слова: мода, література, високе та масове мистецтво, індустріалізація, «всєядність» та «однаядність» культури.

Introduction. The socio-cultural differentiation of arts into high and low helps categorize and evaluate cultural products based on perceived levels of sophistication, complexity, and societal value.

According to historical and class-based perceptions, high culture emphasizes refinement and artistic merit [21]. Alternatively, low culture is seen as more accessible and populist, catering to mass audiences

with entertainment-focused content. By examining historical and modern conditions that shape the cultural divide, this study aims to compare how the artistic fields of literature and fashion reflect the context of high and low culture.

High/low cultural context. Raymond Williams [49] identified the separation of “culture” from “society” rooted in 18th and 19th-century capitalism. This autonomy, seen as a response to industrial challenges, led to a distinct high culture detached from society. The term ‘highbrow’ appeared in the late nineteenth century to define a refined aesthetic capacity associated with the well-educated [27]. Bourdieu [5] distinguishes high and low culture (classical and popular) as belonging to certain groups in society: elites and intelligentsia determine what constitutes good taste due to education and the ability to appreciate art that has no purpose other than aesthetic; working-class expects any object to have a function because of financial constraints. Therefore, apart from class-based accessibility variation, the functionality of artistic products or lack of it poses a considerable part of the high/low distinction.

However, the view of art – “true” art – as devoid of function is relatively new. The Aesthetic Movement in the late 19th century proposed a notion of “art for the sake of art” to defy the perceived Victorian moralism and the utilitarian and materialistic aspects of industrialization, emphasizing the beauty of art, the movement opposed the need for a didactic or moral purpose in art [22]. However, in Aestheticism’s detachment from life, art became a means of entertainment instead of providing meaningful intellectual engagement [45]. Further superficial connotations spawned due to the association with hedonism and the pursuit of pleasure. In a key work of Aestheticism, “The Picture of Dorian Gray” (1890) by Oscar Wilde, the pursuit of aesthetic pleasure is celebrated in Gray’s unchanging appearance while his portrait reflects the hidden moral decay. Ultimately, Wilde admits the superficiality and moral vacuum that can result from a sole focus on external beauty and pleasure despite advocating for the movement. Having evolved past Aestheticism’s principles, the concept of high culture embraced both moral and intellectual aspects of artistic expression. According to Levine [27], toward the turn of the century, particularly in the USA, the divide between high and low became a way to counteract the effects of industrialization, urbanization, and the influx of immigrants.

Rooted in industrialism, materialism is one of the prominent critiques of low culture due to being cheap and mass-produced. Gans [18] notes that to appeal to a large audience, mass products are more

standardized in comparison with works of high art, which are ideally non-commercial. Regarding literature, Temirbolat et al. [20] explain that easy-reading novels adhere to genre-specific clichés and plot formulas rather than invent new elements, which results in books with predictable characters, plot twists, etc. However, since mass literature caters to a wide audience, readers expect certain narrative conventions. It is also stated that due to the spread use of plot formulas, the terms “author” and “writer” should not be used synonymously: writing mass literature is a commercial practice done by a “writer”, while the term “author” is associated with higher quality, complex works [19, p. 14–15]. Although this distinction highlights the tension between the artistic and commercial aspects of literature, the main purpose of producing mass art is reduced to monetary gain.

Nevertheless, the critique of mass culture as inherently materialistic is hypocritical since high culture was and still is intrinsically tied to economic privilege. Bourdieu [5] introduces the concept of cultural capital as a form of symbolic wealth that the rich accumulate to establish and reinforce social distinctions. Historically, only the upper classes had the means to be cultured since attending cultural events, acquiring fine art, and participating in academic pursuits often required significant financial resources. In this regard, while intellectual in nature, engaging with arts as a part of one’s lifestyle is a relatively leisurely pastime that was not available to the working class due to monetary and time constraints.

However, the spread of literacy and shorter workdays in the second half of the 19th century contributed to the expansion of the reading public in the West [29]. Due to advancements in printing technology and distribution methods, publishers capitalized on the demand, producing cheaply-made serialized novels and popular fiction which raised anxieties about the degradation of literary standards [33]. Although Lyons [29] notes the emergence of a self-educated working-class intelligentsia, the working class preferred popular literature despite the promotion of classics, moral, and educational books in public libraries. Consequently, social elites displayed concern about the tastes and preferences of the new readers and the potential impact on societal stability.

The resistance against mass culture was not only rooted in aesthetic or intellectual concerns but also – in social and behavioral aspects. Levine [27] explains the influx of the masses into American cities resulted in the unbecoming behavior of the common people in places of culture, such as talking and spitting tobacco in opera houses, touching exhibits in museums, ladies blocking the view of the stage with wide-brimmed

hats, etc. This human side of the high/low opposition shows that although the working class received increased access to cultural resources, the nature of engagement differed between audiences from the high and low classes. As follows, the long-standing acclaim of numerous classical works resulted in massification, and, per Gans [18], devaluation. Due to overexposure, misinterpretation, or reduction to clichés, the exclusivity and perceived depth associated with high art is lost. For example, Shakespeare's tragedy "Romeo and Juliet" (1597) is often oversimplified as a love story, diluting its exploration of social conflicts and impulsive actions. Levine [27] notes that Shakespeare was popular entertainment in 19th-century America for all social classes. While the classification of a particular work as solely high/low oriented may not be fixed, the reception and interpretation will vary.

Amidst the industrial and urban changes, the elites reconnected the position of culture to the pre-industrial contexts by monopolizing beauty, complexity, and intellectual depth as high-status notions. Labeling mass culture and its products as "lowbrow" further amplified its derogatory standing and the opposition between classes.

Industrialization and the rise of fashion. The transformative effect of industrialization on society, economy, and culture did not exclude fashion. The transformative effects of industrialization on society, economy, and culture also facilitated the emergence of fashion. Per Lipovetsky [28], the notion of fashion as a pursuit of novelty is tied to industrialization and mass production. However, Wilson's [50] and Svendsen's [42] understanding of fashion is connected with the beginning of mercantile capitalism in 14th-century Europe, citing the economic developments in the late medieval period which promoted a rapid adoption of new styles of dress. Still, these two periods are not mutually exclusive as either fostered larger social and economic shifts in society, representing different stages in the development of fashion.

Cole and Deihl's book "The History of Modern Fashion" [12] starts with 1850, and while the authors recognize that 19th-century clothes are not perceived as modern today, mechanized production is what allows this categorization. It can be argued that truly modern clothing began no earlier than the 1920s because the basic principles of garment construction have remained relatively consistent since. Before the 1920s, women's clothing was tailored to create a structured silhouette, with multiple layers of undergarments and corsetry, and this distinct sartorial experience divorced historical clothing from modern fashion. Consequently, the use of a sewing

machine became a quantitative change without affecting the quality as clothing remained distinctly unmodern. Simply put, if we disregard the stylistic aspects that define the dominant silhouette of each decade from the 1920s on, those garments can be worn today which cannot be said for older fashions. Although the streamlined and simplified construction of modern clothing can be seen as a side-effect of mass production, this standardization is a result of fashion manufacturing evolution that started with mechanized production.

Schneider [40] finds a resonance between Veblen's [47] theory of conspicuous consumption and Simmel's [41] views on fashion, which focus on its exclusivity, both in the sense of the high aesthetic appeal of expensive products and differentiation from lower-status groups. Hence, the constant change of fashion and the subsequent display of fashionable items become a means for the affluent to signal their social status while excluding those who cannot participate. Regardless of the date prescribed for the beginning of fashion, before industrialization, the adoption of beautiful and new clothing existed only as a high culture pursuit and as an aspirational notion for the lower classes. Since it benefited many with the accessibility of fashionable clothes, Breward [7, p. 184] argues against Benjamin's [4] derogatory view of mass production, posing that instead of "undifferentiated sameness" it promoted individualization like previous periods. Consequently, mechanical production democratized fashion and made it into a mass culture product.

With the emergence of couture in the mid-19th century, fashion was divided into luxury and mass-produced items, reflecting the societal classes with distinct lifestyles and objectives. Although Lipovetsky [28] acknowledges the existence of intermediate organizations between the two extremes, new fashions stemmed from haute couture while clothing manufacturers tried to replicate luxury goods at different price points. In this context, the nature of consumption changed as fashionable garments became attainable for different socio-economic groups almost at the same time. Furthermore, as Lemire [25] points out, beyond cheaper mass-produced items, this extended to the secondhand clothing trade, which allowed lower-income individuals access to better, more luxurious garments.

Given that at the turn of the century, Veblen [47] and Simmel [41] discuss fashion from the point of view of luxury, it is clear that mass production did not erase the class-signaling aspect of clothes. Bourdieu's [5] theory suggests that people from different social

classes will have distinct tastes shaped by their upbringing and social environment. Arguably, the distinction achieved through fashion became more nuanced than before since fashion in itself was no longer limited to the rich, and the ornate designs and opulent details of garments served as conspicuous markers of social status. Accordingly, as only in the 1920s fashion abandoned the elaborate ornamentation characteristic of previous decades [28], the gap between the 19th century and the sartorial modernity of the 1920s juxtaposes the industrializing world and clothes that do not match it.

This contradiction is observed by Breward [7, p. 177], who finds 19th-century fashion “an uneasy bonding of old and new” (), which reflects the broader cultural and secular realities of that time. Industrialization was accompanied by poor working and living conditions for the lower classes and pollution in the rapidly growing cities; in response, literature, art, design, and architecture developed aesthetics with whimsical motifs, romantic compositions, and elaborate ornamentation, opposing the prosaic conditions of Victorian life. The second half of the 19th century saw medieval influences in the Pre-Raphaelites [26] and the Gothic revival [10], strong anti-industrial ideology in the Arts and Crafts movement [45], and a departure from classical traditions in design in Art Nouveau [1]. In between art and the everyday, 19th and early 20th-century women’s clothes embodied this resistance as well and exemplified the justified unreadiness of society to trust in the future.

While fashion may not have originated in industrialization, it became widespread and more accessible as a result of new production means; in turn, the adherence to antiquated aesthetics further reinforced the class symbolism historically inherent in fashion. Serving as a form of artistic expression and social distinction, fashion reflected the complexities and uncertainties of daily life during industrialization.

Fashion vs. art, fashion as art. By naming haute couture as culture, Bourdieu [6] highlights the structural homology between the field of production of fashion garments and other cultural goods, emphasizing the interconnectedness and the shared dynamics of their production i.e. power dynamics, conservation and subversion strategies regarding the cultural capital, and tensions between established and emerging forces. However, the non-abstract and practical nature of clothing affects its perceived cultural weight. Unlike the high/low debate in the field of literature, where the discussion concerning the hierarchy is within literature itself, whether fashion/clothing is art is an ongoing discussion. The

arguments against it center around the practical aspect of clothes – being a commodity is a contradiction to being an art object [3]. According to Benjamin [4], mechanical manufacturing excludes the possibility of calling a product a piece of art. Moreover, the commercial side of fashion overshadows any potential elevated artistic qualities as designers need to keep up with the demands of the market and the bi-annual production of new collections [43]. Therefore, it is tempting to conclude that all mass-produced clothing is not a creative item. However, clothing assembly is not done on a mechanized conveyor belt and every type of apparel is put together by humans.

Furthermore, Ladenthin [24] highlights clothing as a defining human feature, serving both functional and symbolic roles. Ladenthin [24] stresses the distinctiveness of traditions/conventions in shaping values, emphasizing that functional and cultural meanings of clothing demand separate consideration. It is generally accepted that clothes primarily protect and cover the body, while decorative function is secondary [50]. However, such a functionalist approach dismisses the role of dysfunctional clothing. Decorative elements and accessories perform a decorative function rather than being a necessity and send cues about the social and financial status of the wearer. It can be argued that solely practical clothing, such as utility clothes or uniforms, should be discussed separately due to being used in specific contexts.

In “Sartor Resartus” (The Tailor Re-tailored) [8], historian and philosopher Thomas Carlyle notes that ornamentation plays a significant role even among “wild” or “barbarous” people, preceding the practical aspects of clothing, such as warmth or decency. His observation is in agreement with Darwin’s description of unclothed tribal people in “The Voyage of the Beagle” [14], who when provided with fabric, prioritized its use for decoration over protection from harsh environmental conditions. Based on these perspectives, clothing has had artistic purposes beyond modern fashion which challenges the notion that the practical function of clothes is primary.

Due to the hierarchy of legitimacy within culture, Bourdieu [6, p. 46] suggests that discussing a “less guarded” subject, like fashion, is not likely to be rejected in comparison to more legitimate objects, such as fine art. The juxtaposition of clothes and fine art involves idealized connotations regarding the latter to deemphasize the artistic features of clothes and fashion, focusing on mass production, the functional act of being worn, and downplaying the complexity and design features of haute couture pieces. However, the perception of the legitimacy

of art and clothing may vary since depending on the context both carry different functions. For example, Mandel [30] discusses art as an investment together with its conspicuous consumption purpose, therefore, the traditional notion of art as a conspicuous object may be compromised by its commodification within the investment market.

On the other hand, fashion exhibitions held at art galleries and museums level clothes and art history, presenting clothes alongside artworks as illustrations only, devoid of any utilitarian purpose [37]. Despite the undeniable commodification of clothes, Taylor [43] further acknowledges the benefits of displaying fashion outside of the commercial domain as it shifts the focus from its materialistic aspects to artistic qualities, adding cultural value. Svendsen [42] proposes the idea of fashion trying to elevate itself to art through association, evident in Schiaparelli's partnership with Dalí, Gustav Klimt's collaboration with fashion designer Emilie Flöge, and Yves Saint Laurent's 1965 Mondrian-inspired collection, exemplifying the broader historical trend of artists engaging with fashion. The intersection of visual arts and fashion is not a new phenomenon, consequently, recognizing fashion as an art form would elevate its significance from a commodity to a legitimate part of the broader cultural narrative.

Modern perspectives. Instead of the high/low divide, Peterson [35] proposes the omnivore-to-univore hierarchy, i.e. engaging with a wide range of cultural forms or limiting cultural consumption to a specific domain. Although Peterson and Kern [36] argue for a replacement of snobbism in highbrow individuals in favor of omnivorousness, interpretations of the omnivore theory either propone cultural egalitarianism or sole consumption of various cultural expressions while maintaining class distinctions [15]. While the omnivore approach is more nuanced than the original elite vs. mass distinction, cultural capital required for omnivorousness suggests a level of sophistication and access to diverse resources associated with privileged groups. Hence highbrow individuals are more likely to be omnivores and lowbrow – univores [35]. Furthermore, Prieur and Savage [39] argue that emerging cultural capital has evolved past Bourdieu's *Distinction* [5] to encompass cosmopolitan knowledge and tastes as a means of establishing class-based differentiation. As follows, privileged groups exhibit omnivorous consumption of literature and are likely knowledgeable about current literary trends [51]. Concerning fashion, Michael [32] notes a strive for critical engagement with current trends, where one aims to balance being up-to-date and self-expression with an ultimate goal

of authenticity. Voronin [48] ties omnivorousness to postmaterialistic values, therefore, the pursuit of authenticity in cultural consumption intersects with socioeconomic privilege, which allows omnivores to seek meaningful experiences that align with their values and identities. Consequently, the predisposition of lower classes to univorous consumption emerges from monetary constraints that limit their scope of reach to mass culture due to its accessibility.

Since Peterson [35, 36] discusses highbrow individuals adopting new tastes due to the democratization of culture, his research omits social mobility as a contributing factor to the emergence of cultural omnivores. While there are inconsistent results about the impact of social mobility on omnivorousness [9, 13, 46], Friedman's [17, p. 31] definition of it as a "trajectory of one's cultural capital resources" underscores high culture as a learned field for the upwardly mobile individuals in contrast to the readily available mass culture. Mass culture's reliance on novelty as a means to capture the audience's attention minimizes a product's time in the spotlight [18], which further limits the possibility of critical engagement in the consumption pattern of a univore. On the contrary, an omnivore consumes cultural products selectively, therefore, social mobility and subsequent adoption of highbrow tastes allow for a critical reevaluation of both lowbrow and highbrow forms to achieve an authentic cultural experience.

It is safe to say that cultural critiques advocating for the blurring of the lines between high and low culture come from the perspective of omnivores. However, in the advocacy for the merits of the best examples of mass culture, the lower-quality works may be dismissed. While high culture is relatively consistent in quality, mass culture exhibits a substantial variability that undermines it as a whole.

The modern mass fashion industry is synonymous with the term fast fashion, referring to a business model with short production and distribution time to meet the market demands as fast as possible [11, p. 3], contributing to a culture of disposable consumption due to a rapid trend turnover facilitated by social media. Despite urges to do away with low-quality garments, unethical business practices, and major environmental concerns [44], consumers' desire to participate in trends together with the extreme accessibility and affordability of fast fashion items induce overconsumption [34].

Likewise, BookTok, a TikTok literary sub-community, has been accused of turning publishing into fast fashion on the grounds of distinctly unsustainable practices displayed by the readers, authors, and content creators on the platform [23],

specifically, purchasing or producing poorly written under-edited books based on trends. Some recognize BookTok as a powerful marketing tool and a space for readers to engage with each other [31], and even its use for student literacy [16]. Others stress the superficiality and performative nature of the act of reading, such as hoarding unread books [38], and the obsessive reading goals that prioritize a competitive approach to the number of books read per month or a year over a meaningful engagement [2].

Within their respective fields, BookTok and fast fashion are representative examples of mass culture's quality concerns due to a reliance on trends, short-term popularity, and the quantity-over-quality approach in consumption and production habits, reinforcing the high/low cultural divide. Consequently, consumers becoming aware of the quantitative and qualitative downsides of mass culture would contribute to the development of omnivorousness. Since following trends signals inauthenticity and superficiality [32], an omnivorous approach will foster prioritizing substance in fashion and literature, individuality, and a more sustainable cultural consumption overall.

Conclusion. Industrialization and mass production facilitated the widespread dissemination of cultural products to the masses, incomparable to the pre-industrial times, which caused the separation of culture into high and low according to the class-based consumers of each category. While mass production allowed the general public access to affordable cultural products for the first time and its benefits are evident retrospectively, the commodification and the lack of quality and intellectual depth of mass culture posed legitimate concerns at the time. Writing mass literature as a commercial practice and the devaluation of the classics due to their massification contributed to the anxiety about the changing cultural landscape.

Since culture was exclusive to the upper classes before industrialization, it is undeniable that the high/low distinction was also rooted in elitism and fear of the masses. In this context, fashion transitioned from the high pre-industrial status to mass culture as well, and its use as a class signaling tool in itself was no longer restricted to the social elites. Women's fashion exemplified the resistance against the negative effects of industrialization by reflecting the nostalgic motives present in contemporary artistic movements. The lack of consensus about the status of fashion as art downplays its cultural value. The commercial aspect of fashion is hard to dismiss but it is important to acknowledge its decorative and artistic functions as effective means of communicating cultural information due to the clothes' immediate visibility and intimate connection with the body.

Although modern perspectives acknowledge the merits of diverse cultural expression and discuss cultural consumption in terms of omnivore to univore hierarchy, the socio-economic privilege required to become cultured and the unchanging criticisms of mass culture highlight the persistence of the cultural and class-based distinctions. While the Internet and social media contribute to hyper accessibility of culture, it also results in the unsustainable practices of conspicuous consumption as heavily promoted by the fast fashion industry and BookTok online community, reliant on overconsumption and superficiality.

When mass culture emerged as a product of industrialization, the novelty of abundance in itself was notable. Unlike the largely overworked and undereducated public of the 19th and early 20th centuries with limited potential for critical engagement with culture, modern consumers have a moral obligation for mindful cultural consumption in light of environmental and quality concerns.

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