

# Today's fashion -- lifestyle fascism

*The Lace Ghetto* by Maxine Nunes and Deanna White was published by new press of Toronto in 1972. A verbal collage of writings about women and the women's movement written during the first surge of feminism, the book has worn remarkably well. This feature is excerpted from the chapter titled "Fashion."

A wealthy woman postures before a mirror in a store's elegant salon. She gazes intently at the reflection, inspects the form and the body from every vantage point, imagines she is someone else watching the image. Her face is tight, her eyes are tense. Her decision, she knows, is a test of her worth. She is shopping for clothes.

Downtown a young girl flits through the racks in a crowded boutique. The room is hot, she is tired, but her search goes on. She quickly tries on garment after garment in a small, close changing room, jostles for position before a large mirror. She is surrounded by thin, smiling, nodding sales people. She must be sure. Her decision is crucial.

What are these women looking for? Why the intensity, the religious scrutiny? What is driving these women is the power of what they are promised. Physical imagery. Self-expression. Definition through fashion.

Not all women take part in this fashion ritual. The countercultural community is establishing a carefree, less demanding concept of dress that avant-garde designers like Rudi Gernreich look to for inspiration and hail as a symbol of a new universal in human relations. According to Gernreich, the so-called glamour magazines like *Vogue* are beginning to die: "All the old social structures are rapidly changing — snobbism, the select few — we now detest these characteristics, and that symbolism in fashion is fading. The glamour magazines are in trouble; financially speaking, they are not what they used to be."

Although the clothing-as-freedom concept is gaining acceptance, the strict dictates of glamour still hold sway over most women. "Beauty is the foundation of woman's confidence," reads the first line in the brochure for Toronto's Eleanor Fulcher Self-Improvement and Model School. The brochure underlines quite clearly the fact that a woman's first duty is to seek a visual identity. For some women this becomes one interesting facet of their lives. For others it becomes their only attempt at self-expression. Certainly the cult of physical beauty is the most visible manifestation of the feminine need to please others.

Especially to the housewife, the pursuit of fashion is held out as a respectable substitute for more creative types of achievement. For working women who may perform boring tasks daily, clothes can appear to be a release from frustration. In "Fashism", an excellent article from the University of Toronto's undergraduate paper *The Varsity*, writer Susan Perly says: "Women have to exist through the false illusion of fashion, if there is nothing else in their lives they can grasp ... So they attempt to fill the void in their existence by consuming, among other things, clothes. Days are spent searching out the right dress, shoes, stockings, to go with a coat. They see themselves defined through the clothes and accessories they wear. It is their individual statement."

## Fashion psyche

To probe the psychology behind woman's preoccupation with fashion, we taped original interviews with Montreal couturier John Warden and American "unisex" designer Rudi Gernreich, and a conversation with three Canadian women — sculptor and new feminist Maryonn Kantaroff, boutique designer and former fashion writer for the Toronto *Telegram* Marni Grobba, and Heather Petrie, a twenty-two-year-old secretary and former model.

Insecurity is a theme delicately played upon by the fashion industry; it is not, as some would believe, created by the industry only. As long as woman remains society's embodiment of human beauty and sexuality, as long as the onus is upon her, and not the male, to be stylish and alluring, and as long as she remains frustrated by not achieving creatively in other ways, woman will be insecure in regard to her physical appearance.

But according to Montreal fashion designer John Warden, insecurity is the prologue to beauty. He told us: "You certainly have to be insecure to look good. You cannot look great if you are not insecure about yourself. If you are sure, you would not try harder. It is this drive to improve that creates beauty. Confident women are passed by in the street by people who remark only lightly, 'That's just another pretty face.' Everyone in this industry is complex, insecure, whatever. It is a terrible dynamic, but it is necessary. Their insecurity creates an excitement that really provokes a lot of things to happen. To really stand out you must be a little paranoid."

Rudi Gernreich doesn't agree. He feels the days of fashion-magazine insecurity-baiting ploys are over: "If a woman is relaxed about beauty and doesn't have to compete, she comes off looking better. She no longer has to be beautiful and in a sense therefore becomes more beautiful. She cannot be beautiful if she has to, if it is imposed. That is why some older women are such pathetic, monstrous creatures. They have to be beautiful until death. Our concept of beauty is changing, kids no longer attach so much importance to stereotyped form. All this traditional cultural symbolism is going out. The number of women that still need the traditional kind of support is diminishing. They are immature."

In 1972 Jackie Kennedy Onassis spent \$300,000 on clothes. That is, admittedly, an astronomical figure. More down to earth, no doubt, is the advice of *Harper's Bazaar* fashion columnist Eugenia Sheppard, who suggests: "The absolute minimum for which a fastidious woman of fashion can cover her nakedness" is \$20,000.

"A really clothes-conscious aspirant," she adds, "will spend upward of \$100,000 a year on dresses alone."

## "Feeling good"

Why do women go to such extremes, why have they become so obsessed with being beautiful? Feeling good and looking good, even physical adornment, are healthy, natural aims. Using apparel as a vehicle to extend one's identity visually is enjoyable. There is drama and enchantment in dressing up. After all, life is partly theatre, or as Ken Kesey says, in Tom Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, "Everybody, everybody everywhere has his own movie going." Turning on with clothes can be fun. But being *obsessed* by beauty and wardrobe is not fun; it suggests a dangerous narcissism, desperation, and a tremendous output of energy that may be more satisfyingly applied elsewhere.

Marni Grobba: *Fashion is an expression or outlet for a lot of people who cannot point or perform some other kind of creative activity.*

Maryonn Kantaroff: *I think that is a spurious argument.*

Marni Grobba: *I believe it though. I really do.*

Maryonn Kantaroff: *It must make it easier to work in the fashion field if you believe it, but it is a spurious argument. There is no way that fashion as it is sold is helping anyone's creativity. On the contrary — satisfaction comes from pulling something out of oneself rather than buying it. If it comes down to a question of "Do I choose this" or "Do I choose that," one spends the whole day looking for some kind of choice, as opposed to creating it by oneself.*

Maryonn Kantaroff: *Ultimately a woman dresses to please a man because getting a man is a woman's prime motive. Her status in life comes not from herself, but from the man with*

*whom she associates. And so women grow up with the feeling that to obtain a male they must compete, and compete on the worst possible level — their physicalness. During adolescence it is very destructive. Who has the nicest legs, who develops their breasts first, whose hair is longest and blondest. Whereas boys, while growing up, compete on a different level — who can run the fastest, who gets the best marks at school, who is toughest. They can fight it out. To me that is much healthier kind of competition. Women, instead, learn to compete destructively and to suspect one another. Women really do put down other women.*

*We speak of their dressing for men; they are actually doing so only indirectly. At a party, for example, a woman's first concern is to sum up the competition. She does not waste her time watching men, the reason being very clear — a woman cannot choose a man. She is in the position of object who must appeal to someone else.*

## Coming together

In his book *They Became What They Beheld*, Edmund Carpenter talks of the advantage of the anonymity of ugliness, the advantage of being "unspecified" by appearance: "Cosmetics and clothing advertisers assume everybody wants to be beautiful. Actually, lots don't. Being beautiful is being specified. A beautiful woman is expected to 'dress and act accordingly' — that is, to fill a defined, restricted part. It's a challenge, of sorts, which not everyone is willing, or interested, in meeting."

As our culture moves from stricture to relaxation, so move the relations between men and women. Rudi Gernreich speaks with assurance about the present emancipation of women, and men, as symbolized by dress. Fashion, he says, has become old-fashioned; and so have many other forms of social relations: "Fashion has become anti-

fashion. It stands for values which no longer apply to our current thinking. All the male-female symbolism is being to fade. I no longer think in male-female terms in design. We are moving into an era of less conspicuous, more anonymous clothes. There is a coming together of male and female, and men are no longer looking at women in the old way because they too are being looked at. This statement of unisex says: 'We're human beings — not males and females.' This is a social statement, not a sexual one. And sexually, it is healthier.

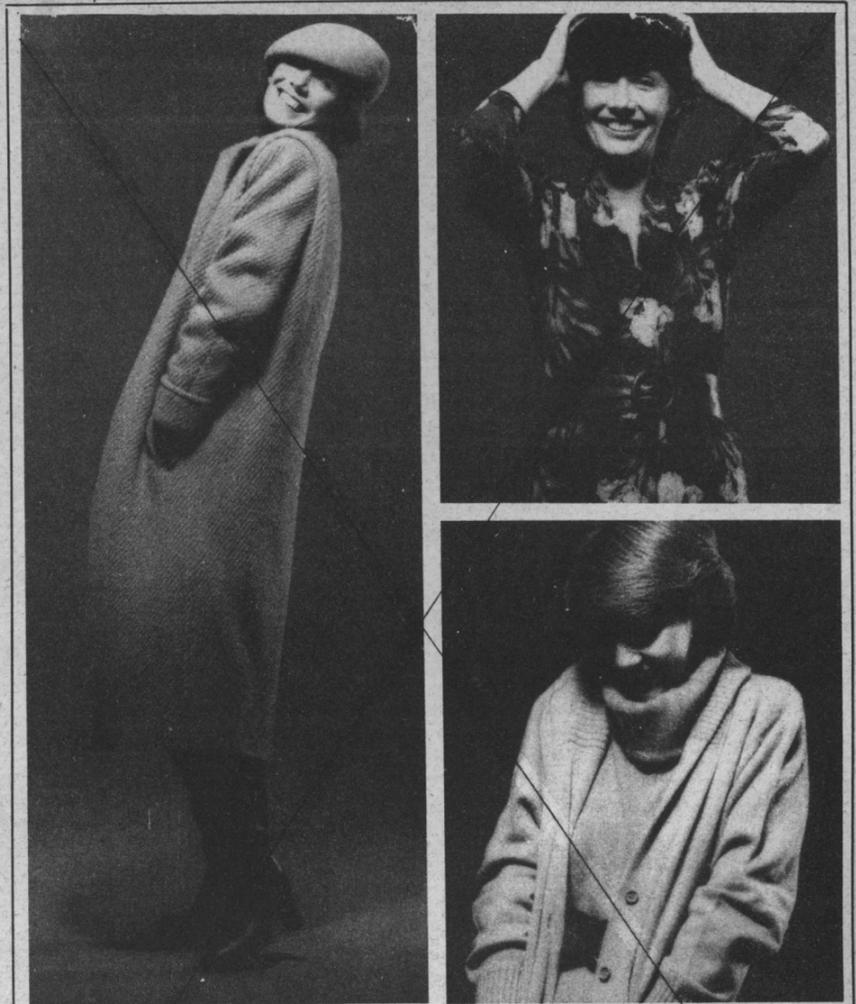
"In films the pedestal, stereotyped image of the 'star' no longer exists. I see a much more uniform look between both sexes which now allows us to individualize ourselves in other ways. In the future, the individuality of a person will manifest itself in different ways. By wearing like clothes, people will be urged to probe further into each others' characters.

"Unisex clothing will help to bring out the real, deeper differences by doing away with the superficial differences of sexual differentiation, which simply get in the way of understanding.

"Historically, woman reverted to slavery — owned by a man so she had to be beautiful, a desirable object to be owned. But now she does not have to be a slave. A complete revolution of women's emancipation has taken place in the last decade. But many women are afraid to be free — it requires a certain responsibility to be a creative and active participant."

*Fine little girl she waits for me she's as plastic as she can be she paints her face with plastic goo and wrecks her hair with some shampoo. Plastic people, hey baby, you're such a drag.*

Frank Zappa  
of The Mothers of Invention



Maria Mursell's look: Casual, sophisticated, classic. A total look.

Maria  
Mursell

This ad, from the fall issue of Toronto life, tells readers that they can become sophisticated by wearing the right clothes.