Clothes and the City:
Urban Fashion in Literature and the Visual Arts
FYSEM-UA 796
Spring 2021

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Office hours: TBA

Seminar meets:
Mondays
3:30-6:00 p.m.

Course Description

Whether we “dress for success” or wear our pajamas to the grocery store, the clothes we are putting on our body all have a meaning. Though clothes are an essential part of our everyday life, do we really stop and think about what they really signify, how they are perceived by people who look at them? In urban environments, where millions of fellow city-dwellers can scan the clothes we are wearing, fashion often have a more significant meaning. Dressing up is such a mundane action we barely wonder why we do it, but shouldn't we consider this act an art? Fashion has been a crucial aspect of literature, cinema, paintings, and graphic novels. Text and textile both mediate a form of language, and fashion is indeed an idiom in itself.

In this course, you will explore the representation of urban fashion in literature, cinema and the arts, in cities across the globe from the nineteenth century to the present. We will dive into a range of texts, films, paintings, and graphic novels that will enable us to grasp better the importance of clothing surfaces, their meaning, implication, and significance regarding issues related to gender, social class, sexuality, and (post-) colonialism. An individual’s identity, personality, and desires are both inscribed on and influenced by the clothes he or she is wearing. The large set of signs that are carried by fashion therefore constitute a closed system of signification, linked with culture itself as well as the senses.
Learning Outcomes

The course aims to give students an insight into a broad range of visual and textual materials, as well as to develop their analytical and critical skills. During each class, students will be asked to discuss the themes emerging from the visual and textual materials, supported by the critical readings related to them. The objective of this interdisciplinary course is also, through materials spanning across a broad variety of genres, media, places and periods, to provide the students with an open and intercultural approach of humanities. Finally, the course aims to develop the students' awareness of their place within a globalized world in which the image of the self – often carried by clothes – is predominant. This puts into perspective the socio-political questions of gender, race, class, colonialism, and sexuality.

Course Assessment

Participation (15%)
Your participation and focus is what drives the progress of each class. Read with a pen in hand and come to class prepared with questions and topics you would like to discuss. Your active and informed contribution is very important. Instead of waiting for me to invite you to speak, you should jump in and respond to your peers. See where the discussion goes!

Homework Assignments (15%)
Each week, you will be responsible for writing a paragraph of questions and reflections on the assigned reading, and/or films. You must read and respond to your peers’ posts, and must end your paragraph with an open question. Post your response and question on NYUClasses by 5pm on Sunday (the day before class). Posts will be graded on the degree to which you engage with the materials and your peers’ posts.

Short Paper (15%)
Well in advance of the paper due date I will provide you with a list of several possible questions from which you will choose one to address in your paper. It should be 4-5 pages in length.

Outdoor Project (20%)
On two separate occasions, you will explore a specific neighborhood in New York City that you think is relevant regarding clothes, and observe both the clothes that people are wearing, and the clothes stores that you can see in these neighborhoods. The objective of this project is not only to observe the type of clothes that people wear, but also to relate them to the material from the course. In this way, you can connect academic considerations and real-life objects in addition to exploring the city where you study during your time at NYU. After this little exploration, you will:

- write a journal entry (minimum 2 pages) in which you will 1/describe what you saw (people and stores), and 2/ analyze and reflect on these observations. What does what you saw mean in terms of social class, gender, race, nationality, sexuality, philosophy, etc.? How can you “read” the clothes you have just observed? Post your journal entry on NYU Classes.
- **a post on the class blog.** On this site, you will gather visual representations of your clothes-hunting expedition! In that neighbourhood, you will take one or two pictures of either a person you think wears interesting clothes (*in which case, please ask permission first!*), or of clothes in a store you think illustrates your journal entry, and post them on the blog, along with captions and a brief description of your trip.

**For safety reasons, all walks should take place in the light of day and in a peopled area**

**Oral Presentation (10%)**
You will give a 5-minute presentation of your clothes-hunting trip, and explain how it relates to the material from the course. You may use your blog post (and/or other pictures) to illustrate your presentation.

**Final Paper (25%)**
In the final paper, you must construct an argument that engages with one or several materials studied in class, as well as with your outdoor project. This paper should be organized with an introduction, a clear progression of your argument, and a conclusion. The argument should be built from close readings of the materials and I encourage you to explore and incorporate the secondary material recommended on the syllabus. You will elaborate on your urban encounter with fashion and draw on readings from the course to back up and strengthen your analyses. This paper is due in class on the day indicated on the syllabus, and should be 10-12 pages in length.

**Course Policies**

- Students with different abilities must be registered at the Moses Center and produce their letter of registration on the first day of classes.

- No laptops or phones in class. They inhibit discussion in a seminar like this one.

- Attendance is required at all sessions. There are no excused or unexcused absences. Every absence over 3 will have an impact on your participation grade, and therefore on your final grade. Please keep in mind that repeated tardiness will also be counted as absences. If you find that a serious illness or family emergency will cause you to miss many classes, you should speak with me or an academic counselor about the possibility of arranging for a withdrawal from the class.

- No late assignments will be accepted.

**Additional Information**

- Please take the time to read the **NYU Honor Code** and information on Academic Integrity: https://cas.nyu.edu/content/nyu-as/cas/ewp/writing-resources/statement-on-academicintegrity.html.
Read carefully the parts on plagiarism. **In accordance with university policies, all work must be your own. If you use a source, you must cite it. Plagiarism will result in a zero for the assignment, and the dean will be notified.**

**Disability Disclosure Statement:** Academic accommodations are available for students with disabilities. The Moses Center website is [www.nyu.edu/csd](http://www.nyu.edu/csd). Please contact the Moses Center for Students with Disabilities (212-998-4980 or mosescsd@nyu.edu) for further information. Students who are requesting academic accommodations are advised to reach out to the Moses Center as early as possible in the semester for assistance.

- You may find the **NYU Writing Center** to be a valuable resource. Information about hours and how to set up an appointment is available here: [http://www.nyu.edu/cas/ewp/html/writing_center.html](http://www.nyu.edu/cas/ewp/html/writing_center.html)

- The **College Learning Center** provides tutoring, academic skills workshops, and help with specific classes, paper writing, study skills, as well as review for exams. All sessions are offered on a walk-in basis and feature tutoring by experienced upper-level students: [https://www.nyu.edu/students/academic-services/undergraduate-advisement/academic-resource-center/tutoring-and-learning.html](https://www.nyu.edu/students/academic-services/undergraduate-advisement/academic-resource-center/tutoring-and-learning.html)

- **The Wellness Exchange:** Support for personal and health-related issues. (212) 443-9999 (24/7 confidential calls): [www.nyu.edu/999](http://www.nyu.edu/999)

**Course Schedule**

*Students will go through a range of textual and visual works including novels, essays, films, graphic novels, photographs and paintings. Scholarly secondary texts will also be assigned. Most readings indicated below only consist of some excerpts. Each week, you will read between 60 and 100 pages.*

**Week 1 - Jan. 25: Introduction. What is Fashion?**

**Reading:** Malcolm Barnard, *Fashion Theory: An Introduction*

**Week 2 - Feb. 1: The Philosophy of Dress**

**Readings:** Oscar Wilde, *The Philosophy of Dress*  
Giacomo Leopardi, *A Dialogue Between Fashion and Death*  
Franz Kafka, “Clothes”  
Roland Barthes, *The Fashion System*

**Film:** Paul Thomas Anderson, *Phantom Thread*
Week 3 - Feb. 8: Fashion and Social Class I

Readings: Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*  
Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*

Feb. 15: No class *(President's Day)*

Week 4 - Feb. 22: Fashion and Social Class II

Readings: F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*  
Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*

Film: Blake Edwards, *Breakfast at Tiffany's*

Week 5 - March 1: Fashion History

*CLASS MEETS AT THE ANNA WINTOUR COSTUME CENTER (METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART).*

Yuniya Kawamura, *Fashion-ology. An Introduction to Fashion Studies*  
James Laver, *Costume and Fashion: A Concise History*

*SHORT PAPER DUE*

Week 6 - March 8: The Dandy I

Readings: Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly, *On Dandyism and George Brummell*  
Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life*

March 15: No class *(Spring Recess)*

Week 7 - March 22: The Dandy II

Readings: Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*  
Andy Warhol, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol: From A to B and Back Again*

*1ST JOURNAL ENTRY + BLOG POST DUE*

Week 8 - March 29: Congolese Sapeurs: Clothes and Race

Reading: Alain Mabanckou, *Blue-White-Red*

Film: Natalya Kadyrova, *The Congo Dandies*
Week 9 - April 5: Out of Fashion?
*CLASS MEETS AT THE FASHION INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY MUSEUM for a tour of the “Reinvention and Restlessness: 1990s Fashion” Exhibition.*

Elizabeth Guffey, *Retro: The Culture of Revival*
Umberto Eco, *The Structure of Bad Taste*

Week 10 - April 12: Gendered Fashion I

Readings: Virginia Woolf, *Orlando: A Biography*
Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*

Week 11 - April 19: Gendered Fashion II

Readings: Virginia Woolf, *Orlando: A Biography*
Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*

Film: Wong Kar-wai, *In the Mood for Love*

*2ND JOURNAL ENTRY + BLOG POST DUE*

Week 12 - April 26: Fashionable Fairy Tales

Readings: Hans Christian Andersen, *The Emperor's New Clothes*
Brothers Grimm, *Cinderella*
Charles Perrault, *Little Red Riding Hood*
Charles Perrault, *Cinderella*
Colleen Hill, *Fairy Tale Fashion*

Film: Jacques Demy, *Donkey Skin*

Week 13 - May 3: Mask, Sex, Power, and Patriotism: The Superhero Costume

Jeph Loeb and Tim Sale, *Catwoman: When in Rome*
Roger Stern, John Byrne, *Captain America: War & Remembrance*

Week 14 - May 10: Conclusion. Overview. Review.

*FINAL PAPER DUE*
Further Reading and Viewing

Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*
Malcolm Barnard, *Fashion as Communication*
Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*
B. Brownie and D. Graydon, *The Superhero Costume. Identity and Disguise*
Giuliana Bruno, *Surface: Matters of Aesthetics*
Bret Easton Ellis, *American Psycho*
Joanne Entwistle, *The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress, and Social Theory*
Nicolas Estournel, *Alain Mabanckou and the Sense of SAPE*
Anne Hollander, *Sex and Suits*
Alison Lurie, *The Language of Clothes*
Stéphane Mallarmé, *On Fashion*
Phyllis Martin, *Leisure and Society in Colonial Brazzaville*
Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, *Watchmen*
Alan Moore and Brian Bolland, *Batman: The Killing Joke*
Émile Zola, *The Ladies’ Paradise*

Sophia Coppola, *The Bling Ring*
Anne Fontaine, *Coco before Chanel*
Ousmane Sembène, *Black Girl*