Katherine APPLEFORD, *Classifying Fashion, Fashioning Class. Making Sense of Women's Practices, Perceptions and Tastes*,
Routledge, London & New York, 2021.

Fashion Studies is a recently established interdisciplinary research field, as elucidated by Elizabeth Wilson in 1985. Nevertheless, scholars, particularly among the founding figures of sociology, have explicitly explored fashion, considering it a phenomenon unique to European modernity. Despite this, until the final decades of the 20th century, the social sciences marginalised it, possibly due to its perception as a futile realm of social action or its association predominantly with women. Katherine Appleford's work thus enters a now independently recognised field, adopting the primitive sociological gaze on fashion, namely the focus on the relationship between fashion and the social class of its practitioners.

In Chapter 3, the author adeptly reconstructs the classical debate while highlighting simplifications, commencing with the influential contributions of Georg Simmel and Thorstein Veblen. These scholars, active at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, defined fashion as a class phenomenon based on differentiation-emulation dynamics.

While these readings were captivating, they proved inadequate over time. Lorna Weatherhill's studies [see f.i. Weatherhill 1986], cited by Appleford, underscore the importance of consumption practices in understanding social positioning.

Through the analysis of inventories of possessions, historians have understood how, from the late Middle Ages to the threshold of the contemporary age, the material quality and fashions of clothing were an indicator of lifestyles and practices spread among social groups that were much less homogeneous than theories based only on socio-economic status assumed. In Italy, for example, the studies of M.G. Muzzarelli [1999] move in the same direction and have in common with Weatherhill's the recognition of the role played by social contexts of life and type of activity in defining, rather than hierarchical positioning on the social class scale, people's systems of tastes, preferences, and consumption. Given the same spending capacity, urban environment and geographic mobility influence people's consumption basket most.

439

Emanuela MORA, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milano, Italy. Email: emanuela.mora@unicatt.it.

Adopting an interpretive framework strictly based on Bourdieu's contribution, Appleford thus embraces the primary instance of classical theories, which sees fashion as an instrument of social distinction but does so by recognising, according to Bourdieu's notion of Habitus, the structuring power of experiences.

I believe this approach is her work's principal strength and weakness. However, before commenting on its approach and results, I want to present its main features.

The research presented in this volume is based on a qualitative study conducted with semi-structured interviews and observations. Fifty-three women were interviewed. Of these, 34 were in individual interviews, 10 in pairs, and the remainder in two focus groups. All, however, applying a questioning "very open-ended, allowing the participants space to discuss their opinions and practices through stories and examples" [7]. The interviews covered four thematic areas: self-image, shopping, fashion influences, and class. The author does not say much about the observations conducted, except that the interviewees showed and commented with her on different outfits and the structure of their wardrobes. The class affiliation of the interviewees was reconstructed based on their "self-classification and their demographics" [8], so apparently, a posteriori after sampling. If I am correct, no information is given about the criteria by which the research participants were selected. The volume is organised into a few chapters of theoretical discussion (first to fourth) and three chapters of discussion of the empirical material collected; it then closes with a concluding chapter that draws summaries of the course taken and identifies new avenues for research.

The starting point of the research is autobiographical and dates to the author's student years in the early 2000s at the University of Durham, a city in the northeast of England, in an area that once thrived on a mining economy with a primarily working-class population.

During that time, the young Appleford experienced how clothing and fashion trends constitute signs of differentiation among various populations, local youth, primarily working-class, and middle-class students. The student Appleford, however, also felt challenged among fellow students and experienced multiple forms of uncertainty and insecurity about how to dress for the many social occasions that university life offered.

Based on this experience, it becomes clear to her that the available studies on the relationship between fashion and class manifest some peculiar shortcomings. On the one hand, they focus exclusively on how working-class women use fashion and clothing in ways considered illegitimate or inauthentic because they are distant from the norm that is

440

considered legitimate and coincident with the fashion practices of middle-class women. On the other hand, they do not consider how the issue of class is mobilised in conversations and discussions about the fashion and clothing practices of working-class and middle-class women alongside one another. The goal of the research, then, is to unpack how women's class identity and history inform ordinary and everyday fashion practices and tastes. The cultural categories on which Appleford focuses her attention are respectability, authenticity, and performance of femininity. They are found in the interviewees' accounts of their practices of dressing up (ch. 5), buying and looking good (ch. 6), and performing motherhood (ch. 7). Attention to age-related turning points in women's lives, however, is a recurring and valuable aspect of this work throughout the research.

In the conclusions, the author summarises what appears to be the main finding of her research: that the middle-class women interviewed tend to judge the fashion performances of working-class women as "sexualised, deviant and inauthentic." Although they admit that such judgments are cultural stereotypes, they use them. On the other hand, working-class women are less focused on morally judging the choices of middle-class women; instead, they comment on the cost and authenticity of the garments middle-class women wear, confirming the economic and occupational status that distinguishes them. Despite this, however, working-class women are aware of the cultural stereotypes that describe them as hypersexual and irresponsible [see:198-199].

The same different dynamics also manifest in how mothers and daughters of the two classes share shopping practices and suggestions on dressing (ch. 7). According to Appleford, conversations and fashion practices between mothers and daughters are pivotal in reproducing class habitus. Consequently, for women of the middle class, a predominant aspect transmitted is the sense of social distance from working-class aesthetics. Mothers impart to their daughters the rules of dressing and respectability: what to wear, and more importantly, what not to wear, what complements what, and so forth.

In working-class families, however, a sense of play and pleasure prevails, transforming fashion consumption into a "joint venture." Following trends in fashion media, shopping together, and sharing tastes, although less anchored in rules and restrictions, still serve as a means to reproduce class aesthetics.

This finding is central to Appleford, as it responds to one of her research interests: looking simultaneously and comparatively at how social class enters the discourses and practices of middle-class and working-class women.

441

In the introduction, the author, following Stuart Hall's insights [1996], underscored that social identity is constructed primarily through the interaction with the Other, which is perceived as external and distinct from oneself. The interviewees' statements persuaded her that, for women of middle-class background, a defining aspect of their identity involves creating a distance from those of working-class origins. Conversely, for the latter, the awareness of being subjected to delegitimising assessments serves as a source of more significant uncertainty and insecurity rather than fostering identification. Consequently, working-class women more prominently employ fashion as a manifestation of cultural capital.

In addition, such class evaluations shed light on how the fashion practices of middle-class and working-class women are structured concerning the central theme that is mobilised when studying fashion practices, that of the appearance regimes adopted. In summary, in Appleford's work, class membership is manifested for middle-class women by the reproduction of the regime of respectability and for working-class women by the reproduction of the regime of social acceptability. Regimes of appearance govern, among other things, dressing in public spaces, and the latter is perceived differently by women of the two classes, as shown in Chapters 5 and 6, devoted to dressing up and looking good practices, respectively. For middle-class women, almost every space is public; wherever they are, they dress up, even at home, because they could "be caught out" by an unexpected caller. Even alone, therefore, these women imagine an unseen audience or imagined audience [Goffman 1956]. In some cases, they can be "an audience for themselves, judging themselves on how they appear" [110], as "maintaining the standards" is felt as part of their social identity, no matter the circumstances they are going through.

For working-class women, on the contrary, there is a significant difference between public and private spaces. In the latter, appearance is not an issue; women dress for purely functional purposes. The former, on the other hand, primarily includes the spaces of work and those of social occasions, such as weekends. In the case of work, the rules for constructing and presenting a good self-image, behind which one can hide, are straightforward for practically all women interviewed in working status, regardless of class. Going out, however, for working-class women implies dressing up as a moment of discontinuity from the daily routine and an opportunity to wear something fashionable and "put on femininity," often to attract the male gaze. This practice has an element of collective play and fun with female friends. Nevertheless, if the occasion

442

involves getting out of local spaces where they meet people they know and about whose judgment they are not concerned, dressing up is accompanied by a subtle concern about one's adequacy and social acceptability.

Consistent with dressing up practices, the work done for looking good, which reveals the specific moral standards of the two classes, also differs. For middle-class women, looking good means wearing garments of a good material quality, classically cut, and intended to last. In contrast, for working-class women, looking good seems to coincide with being fashionable and trendy, as if they saw fashion, Appleford points out, as a form of cultural capital that would enhance their social performance, their inclusion in more central positions in the field, to use Bourdosian terminology. For middle-class women, on the other hand, wearing classic, durable garments corresponds to a sober and prudent ethos of those who do not waste money or be manipulated by advertising.

Appleford's research overturns the Veblenian pattern that saw conspicuous consumption as the instrument for claiming the social legitimacy of the new, progressively dominant middle classes over the traditional aristocratic classes of pre-industrial society [Veblen 1899]. The democratisation of fashion, with fast fashion brands and pervasive communication through media involving all social strata according to intersectional logic, has fostered a profound transformation in the tastes of working-class women. Although careful to adjust their purchases according to their budget, they do not consume following only the "taste of necessity," as Bourdieu [1984] suggested, but the dominant fashion trends.

As I mentioned at the beginning, why does the Bourdieusian framework constitute, in my opinion, both the strength and weakness of this work?

The strength of Bourdieu's approach undoubtedly lies in recognising the multifaceted composition (economic, cultural, social) of symbolic capital that structures different class positions and crystallises in class habitus, authorising moral judgments that create distance and boundaries between individuals and social groups. Within this reference framework, the author acknowledges how, in British society, the symbolic capital that enables the most advantageous positions in the realm of appearance is possessed by middle-class women. She deserves credit for explicitly bringing attention to a theme that has only marginally been addressed in fashion studies and only about specific populations. Since the 1980s, emphasis has been placed on fashion as a tool for communication and the construction of plural identities, more linked to gender and age than social class.

443

However, I suspect that in her initial theoretical framework, there may be a misunderstanding or, at the very least, a shift that later results in a logical fallacy. In particular, I find the parallelism identified by Appleford between the concepts of class and fashion problematic.

At the beginning of the concluding chapter, she states: "At the outset of this book, I suggested that fashion and class are concepts which have much in common. Complex, messy, and nuanced, both can be understood in terms of production and consumption; they are both concerned with individual and collective identities and […] both involve matters of taste and judgments of others. Moreover, within British society, fashion and class have an important relationship, as appearance and manner are employed in judgments of respectability and used to evaluate and place individuals in a social hierarchy" [196]. In the early pages of the book, this consideration is expressed with a nice remark by Grayson Perry [2013], who argues that the British are "marinated" in the material culture of class throughout their lifetime.

This parallelism leads the author to sometimes use the category of fashion and that of class inadvertently almost interchangeably. In doing so, she seems to adopt, in practice—and more implicitly than she addresses in the theoretical discussion—Simmel's assumption that fashion is always class fashion [Simmel 1957. Or. ed. 1908]. It appears that she underestimates another analytical element that could have been derived from Bourdieu's studies, namely the notion of the field necessary to understand how the conditions defining the legitimate composition of symbolic capital change in different action contexts of the interviewed individuals. Moreover, in every field, people experience struggles to conquer and maintain legitimate positions and relative power.

Chapter 4 discusses how the public space is the field where fashion and clothing offer resources to represent and perform one's identity. Fashion is, indeed, a phenomenon related to the public presentation of oneself, as it is linked to regimes of appearance and visibility.

In the discussion of the empirical material, the social class and the adopted regime of appearance seem to be described thoroughly, confirming that middle-class women primarily adopt that of respectability, affirming their socially more central and advantageous position from which they judge working-class women, thus reinforcing the social distance from them. On the other hand, working-class women appear to use fashion more freely in their leisure time, albeit seemingly resigned to being socially marginal and subject to delegitimising judgments.

The collected empirical material, from what can be gleaned from the quotations presented in the relevant chapters, is, however, quite dense.

It is regrettable that, in the central line of argument of the volume, everything is obstinately linked to the correspondence between the predominantly adopted regime of appearance and social class, confirming the parallelism between the concepts of class and fashion.

It should be emphasised that the interviewed women refer to social class by citing economic, educational, and domestic environment aspects only when directly asked about the topic. [197] From a methodological perspective, this seems to weaken the robustness of the results, even though the author notes that it is still possible to infer the connection between social class and fashion from the practices recounted by the interviewees.

Moreover, from a methodological standpoint, it seems that the 53 conducted interviews constitute a limited sample for drawing conclusions about the relationship between fashion and social class among British women. However, the explored sample offers exciting insights into the ongoing *negotiation* processes that "dressing up" and "looking good" practices imply for each woman. S. Woodward's research [2007], "Why Women wear what they wear," frequently cited by the author, proposes this key to exploring the complex process through which women find adjustments between their desires, their body perception, and the social expectations to which they are subjected for the various contexts of their lives. Social class is undoubtedly one of the most relevant constraint systems influencing women's clothing practices. However, Woodward shows how it becomes real within constraints involving, among others, fashion media, family conditions, age, ethnicity, other socio-cultural variables, body shape, and occupation. All these elements are present in the narratives of Appleford's interviewees. In chapters 5, 6, and 7, the interview excerpts are reported and collected even transversely to the social class of the interviewees. The author considers anxieties about the fear of not measuring up, the desire to put on femininity, exposure to beauty and fashionability media models, and concerns about the presentability of one's body as essential elements in understanding the fashion practices of her interviewees. However, in the argumentative context, she deems it decisive to trace everything back to the Habitus of the middle- and working-class, in this way sacrificing the interpretability of some collected stories.

This argumentative strategy also seems to reduce Bourdieu's conflict-oriented approach, which sees social actors struggling to conquer and maintain their social positions in the social fields they navigate.

Insisting on the parallelism between fashion and social class seems to make Appleford lose sight of an important point: fashion is a system of

445

values, practices, and action models that reach all women as a field toward which they must claim their legitimate position based on their daily practices and the worlds they inhabit. The social class to which they belong, with its regime of respectability, offers some valuable tools to middle-class women to claim a legitimate position in fashion. However, it excludes them from other positions that, from an intersectional perspective, could be considered. Working-class women, relying on more limited economic capital, use accessibility to media and the fashion imaginary as a resource that expands their cultural capital, often less endowed with formal titles. In the presented research, we see how the battle of middle-class women is played out in confirming the social distance from the aesthetics of the working class. In the disinterest of working-class women for the exercise of the opposite evaluative practice, we could perceive a signal that for them, the stake is in another arena or another cultural broth where marinating tastes and practices, to stay with Perry's image.

REFERENCES

BOURDIEU Pierre, 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London).

GOFFMAN Erwin, 1956. *Presentation of Self in Everydaylife*, (Edinburgh, University of Edinburgh Social Research Centre).

HALL Stuart, 1996. Who Needs Identity?, in S. HALL and P. DU GAY (eds.), *Questions of Cultural Identity*, Sage, London and Thousand Oaks (CA).

MUZZARELLI Maria Giuseppina, 1999. *Guardaroba medieval. Vesti e società dal XIII secolo al XVI secolo*, Il Mulino, Bologna.

PERRY Grayson, 2013. "Taste is Woven into Our Class System," in *Telegraph*, 15 June.

SIMMEL Georg, 1957. Fashion. *American journal of sociology*, 62(6), 541–558 (Or. Ed. 1904–1911).

VEBLEN Thorstein, 1899. *Theory of the Leisure Class* (Dove Publication, London).

WEATHERHILL Lorna, 1996. *Consumer Behaviour and Material Culture in Britain 1660-1760*, Routledge, London and New York.

WILSON Elizabeth, 1985. *Adorned in Dreams. Fashion and Modernity*, Virago, London.

WOODWARD Sophie, 2007. *Why Women Wear What They Wear*, Berg, Oxford.

EMANUELA MORA