

The role of the stylist in hypermodern image-making

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This paper will aim to define fashion styling as an intellectual pursuit in historic, theoretical and practical terms.

Introduction

The fashion photographer Nick Knight, in conversation with Imran Amed for the Business of Fashion interview series (London, 26th November 2010), stated that “the narrative in fashion imagery comes from the clothes” and claimed later in the same interview that he only needs “a camera, a model and one light to make a fashion film.” This paper does not set out to criticise Nick Knight or the role of the photographer or fashion designer in the fashion image-making process but, in this instance, Knight fails to acknowledge that the stylist is an important contributor to the image-making process. If it could be suggested that the services of a fashion stylist are essential to the production of a fashion image what is their precise role in this process? Recognition of the stylist, in any capacity, is a relatively recent phenomenon. This paper will discuss why the stylist’s role has been historically overlooked, and what cultural shift in the Twenty-first century could have caused the role of the stylist to become more prominent.

The role of the stylist and the styling process

It is necessary to define, in practical terms, what a fashion stylist does. Very little literature includes reference to, or acknowledgement of, the role of the stylist. As such, much of the material initially referenced is drawn from magazine articles and primary research conducted by the authors. For a feature in the Observer in 2002 (November 17th), Tamsin Blanchard interviewed a number of stylists and fashion industry representatives, in an attempt to answer the question: ‘What is a stylist?’ As an introduction to the feature, Blanchard summarised a perceived lack of public awareness of the stylist’s position in the fashion industry:

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It is one of those vague job descriptions nobody really understands. Fashion magazines are run by them, movie celebrities and pop stars rely on them; television programmes like *Sex in the City* even have them on the production team. But what exactly do they do all day? *Go shopping?* (2002)

In 2007 the art and design publisher, Rizzoli, produced a coffee table book entitled ‘Stylist: Interpreters of Fashion’. The authors, Mower and Martinez describe the stylists included in the publication as: “Image-makers, trendsetters, taste-makers, visionaries.” The description gives a definition of the stylist’s role, albeit brief. The remit of the stylist, the tasks that they are commissioned to perform, varies and this is often dependent on the field that the stylist is working in. Stylists work closely with fashion designers in the production of fashion catwalk, in film and in advertising. The focus of this paper is on editorial fashion photography and the role of the stylist in this particular creative process; it is therefore necessary to define what a fashion stylist would be expected to do when commissioned by a magazine to ‘style’ a shoot. The degree of creative responsibility can vary; it is dependent upon a number of factors: the publication, the editorial hierarchy, the photographer, whether the shoot is on location or in a studio or whether the stylist is a member of the editorial team or freelance. A stylist could be expected to:

- Plan the initial concept or narrative and provide story boards or mood boards to communicate the concept to the team of professionals working on the shoot
- Source locations
- Cast models
- Source and collect all clothing and accessories
- Supervise set design and the making, or customisation of, clothing and accessories
- Work alongside the photographer on set, directing the shoot
- Direct make-up and hair design
- In certain circumstances, work alongside a re-toucher during the post-production process

In essence, the stylist, in undertaking all of the above, could be considered (potentially) to have the biggest input in terms of the creation of the image but due to copyright law ownership, unless contracts dictate otherwise, will always be the photographers. The editors of *Vogue* magazine still ensure that the name of the photographer is stamped on each image used in a feature. Is it this issue of ownership that has historically led, in some part, to the role of the stylist in editorial image making being somewhat overlooked?

The rise of the stylist

Since the publication of the Rizzoli photo book, other stylists have been gaining an unprecedented degree of critical acclaim, even acquiring the same degree of celebrity status as the models or performers they dress. Nicola Formichetti, a successful editorial stylist for years, has recently gained mainstream recognition for working as a stylist for the pop performer Lady Gaga. Formichetti is the fashion director of Vogues Hommes Japan and also for clothing brand Uniqlo (advising on the collections and overseeing the advertising); in September 2010 he became creative director at Thierry Mugler. In a recent interview with the Sunday Times Style magazine, Nicola Formichetti himself states that he was initially unsure of the exact role of the stylist. In an attempt to pinpoint exactly what a stylist does, the journalist who interviewed him described the creative process he witnessed as Formichetti was styling catwalk collections for a Mugler Autumn/Winter 2011 menswear show:

45 minutes to show time, he works a model's 'look'. The boy wears an open, razor-cut blazer and baggy trousers, but Formichetti is keen to give them a twist. He throws a diaphanous scarf around the shoulders. 'Walk, please,' he instructs. Better, but he's not satisfied. He reties the scarf so a train flies through the air behind him. He cocks his head for a moment, then pulls the scarf over the model's head, so his features resemble those of an ethereal bank robber. Formichetti smiles. Later, shots of the boy will make several newspapers – all for the sake of a scarf. (Hattersley, 2011)

Hattersley's commentary emphasises Formichetti's skill in manipulating details (catwalk in this instance, but this process could be applied to a fashion photograph or film), as well as making the point that the stylist, in making fast paced, often spontaneous, last minute changes has the power to redefine how clothing communicates in a fashion image. The fact that the image of the model with the chiffon scarf over his head was the one that newspaper fashion editors chose to publish more than any other outfit from that catwalk collection could be offered as a demonstration of how the *styling* of the overall look (whatever that process may entail) is as important in fashion image as the design of items of clothing.

The British Fashion Award category for 'Stylist of the Year' was first introduced in 1999, sitting alongside a variety of design award categories. The title was superseded in 2007 by the Isabella Blow Fashion Creator of the Year award for which hair stylists, photographers, make-up artists are also nominated. In December 2010 Nicola Formichetti won the award and

in the previous year the accolade was accorded to Grace Coddington who has, it could also be argued, achieved the same degree of celebrity as Formichetti.

This formal recognition reinforces the position of fashion stylist as taste *arbiter*, an ‘arbiter’ being defined by the Oxford English Dictionary (1994) in a fashion context as ‘a person who has the power to decide what shall be done or accepted, one with entire control; designers who are the arbiters of fashion’.

Could it be disputed that designers are the arbiters of fashion, or that one role can truly be the arbiter? The saturation of the Internet with the self-published creative output of blogging ‘citizen journalists’ and aspiring fashion photographers has, in the last decade or so, led to the questioning of established creative roles. Despite this questioning of the authority of previously unchallenged arbiters, and in the current climate of uncertainty within the publishing and clothing industries, a number of stylists have attained celebrity status.

Grace Coddington featured prominently in the September Issue (2009), a documentary film about the production of a single issue of US Vogue. The film detailed the working life of the Vogue editorial team and provided an insight into the stylist’s role in the creative process. Acknowledgement of the stylist as an influential, creative decision-maker and of their part in the image-making process is becoming more widespread in the public arena. In July 2009, The Photographer’s Gallery in London opened a four-month exhibition showcasing the photographic imagery produced by stylist Simon Foxtan. The show included examples of editorial photography that Foxtan had produced in collaboration with a number of reputed fashion photographers. The common theme of the exhibition, and what set a precedent, was that the work on display had been styled by the same person and the show wholly acknowledged the importance of the stylist’s role in the image-making process.

Significantly, fashion styling is now offered as a degree level subject at a number of universities. This could be seen as an alignment of the practice of styling in professional, creative and academic terms, with practices that have a far more established history as academic and intellectual such as fine art, photography and fashion design.

Crediting the stylist

According to Mower and Martinez, the term stylist first appeared in magazines in the 1930's (2007). The authors cite Polly Mellen, who worked extensively with Richard Avedon, as an example of someone who first performed the role of stylist:

Mellen occupies a unique position of renown in the fashion pantheon; however, for reasons of historical convention, even her most ardent admirers may not realise the full scope of the amazing work in which she was the invisible hand. (ibid)

It is the 'invisibility' of the stylist, this relative anonymity, which appears to have been addressed in recent years. The stylist has, to some extent, reached a point where he or she is adequately credited for the role that they play in image-making. i-D magazine, for whom Simon Foxtan first worked as a freelance stylist, included 'Styling' as a subsection in the contributor's list in issue 14 in 1983 and credited the stylist in their fashion features from March/April 1984. From this issue onwards the stylists were listed alongside the photographers, their names were typed in the same sized font and the listing was given equal prominence on the page. However, until March 1989 only the photographer was credited for photographic imagery in UK Vogue magazine, along with hair stylists and make-up artists. There was no acknowledgement that anyone else was involved in the production of the shoot. Since that date the magazine has credited the stylist as 'Fashion Editor'. The fact that the hair stylist was credited in Vogue, decades before the fashion editor or stylist was acknowledged, gives an insight into how the fashion economy has evolved. The hair stylist and the salon they worked for were credited, their services advertised in the same way that items of clothing are promoted on the page.

Artist, designer or neither?

In choosing to define the clothing as the most important element of editorial photography, Nick Knight prioritises the role of the designer over that of the stylist (and even the photographer in this instance). Simon Foxtan studied Fashion Design at Central St Martins prior to being approached by Caryn Franklin to work as a stylist for i-D. Speaking at an evening debate session (8th September, 2009) during his tenure at the Photographer's Gallery, Foxtan defined himself as "a frustrated designer who can't be bothered to make clothes". Although the latter comment could be considered an attempt at false modesty, it could

equally be seen to reinforce the assumption that the stylist's role is inferior to that of the designer. Yet, is attempting to compare the two roles an attempt to draw parallels between two creative processes rooted in two radically different disciplines?

Could the process that a stylist engages in when creating fashion image be seen to have as much in common with fine art practitioners, as with the 'product designers' of fashion clothing?

The stylist works with existing ingredients, sourcing, collecting and combining pre-designed objects ('ready mades', to borrow a fine art term), participating in the conception and creation of a photographed scene that is designed to convey meaning. Fine art theory may have moved on since Nicholas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics*, but his term "semionauts"; (1998/2002) meaning "one that discovers the path between signs" could be applied as a description of the job of the stylist.

The term 'bricolage' has been associated with postmodernism in design and architecture (Lyotard 1979). In *Fashion as Communication*, Malcolm Barnard discussed Levi Strauss' original definition of bricolage and its relevance to the role of the fashion designer as someone who communicates with clothing but the term could equally be applied to the practice of the stylist:

The use of materials and styles from the past to create new items of fashion and clothing is straightforwardly the work of the bricoleur. It may be, that is, that the fashion and clothing designer sees themselves as rather more of the craftsman or even the engineer than the bricoleur, and it would be in terms of the specialised tools and so on used in the practice of creative production that such an argument could be mounted. (Barnard 2002 p180).

Fashion designers and buyers work in this way when putting together a themed collection or seeking inspirational reference points for the design of a garment. The assemblage of a fashion collection could be seen as bricolage of design motifs, patchwork of historical and cultural signifiers, in clothing details and fabrics. One could argue that the stylist's knowledge of materials and styles needs to be even more developed than that of the designer because they also need to consider both fashion clothing and fashion representation.

An encyclopaedic visual vocabulary is essential to being a stylist. A stylist needs to be able to 'quote' a style, selecting from an extensive knowledge of the *paradigms* in both fashion design history and the history of photography (Barthes 1964). The stylist can identify clothing details, fabric types, shapes and styles but is equally expected to recognise, and often asked to recreate, styles apparent in the work of photographers and film-makers, for fashion editorial and advertising but also for other genres.

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The stylist's 'use of materials and styles from the past' (Barnard 2002) extends to the selection of clothing, choosing the location, casting models with appropriate physical attributes (again requiring an awareness of what look is appropriate to the 'style' of image being created) and contributing to the construction and composition of the scene of the photographic image.

The metaphor of language, the notion of communicating with clothing, is not an original concept. It is perhaps over-simplistic to suggest that the fashion image-making process is comparable, in a semiotic/linguistic sense, to sentence construction (Lurie 2000). However, Levi Strauss refers to the 'poetry' of bricolage :

...the 'bricoleur' also, and indeed principally, derives his poetry from the fact that he does not confine himself to accomplishment and execution: he 'speaks' not only with things but, as we have already seen, also through the medium of things: giving an account of his personality and life by the choices he makes between the limited possibilities. (1962, p21)

The stylist could be said to create poetry with things. Although one is often able to detect a personal 'style' in the image-making produced by a stylist (or a stylist/ photographer creative partnership) does not usually give an account of his or her personality or life but constructs a fictitious scene using available resources, a story which reflects the personality and life of the character portrayed by the model and which is often expected to show an awareness of the personality and life of the magazine reader.

Aligning the practice of styling with that of the artist, particularly of protagonist and social commentator, enables analysis of the process and effect of styling. Stylist Grace Coddington discusses her shoot with Steven Meisel in US Vogue 2006. The image features model Amber Valetta sitting on a polythene-wrapped sofa with a small boy. Coddington says that the shoot illustrated her annoyance at the encroachment of the communication age:

People don't ever speak to each other anymore, only by computer, telephone, Blackberry. It was really getting to me. I took it a stage further and it became an anti-germ thing about isolation (2007, p53)

Comparing the role of the stylist and the artist in terms of the process they undertake when producing work one could look at the work of artists such as Cindy Sherman or Matthew Barney, and as a precursor to them, that of Claude Cahun.

Sherman's body of work provides numerous examples of social commentary through staged self portraits, in which she is heavily made up and dressed to resemble a particular person or character. This practice could be considered to have more in common with the costume designer for television or film than the stylist, as Sherman's concerns are perhaps more closely related to character than fashion. This point of character construction though, raises the question of what is actually occurring during the styling process, as many stylists claim that they are concerned with something more than communicating fashion, that they are concerned with narrative and character, creating the person the viewer aspires to be.

To further explore the process of styling and how it might align with art practice, one could look at a broader range of art practice. Japanese installation artist Tamoko Takahashi fills spaces with a carefully selected range of objects. Though the installations may appear chaotic, the artist is constructing in response to a particular space. The process Takahashi uses to make work, though not concerned with fashion, photography or the body is concerned with selection of objects and construction within a given space. The stylist, when commissioned to produce an image, or series of images for an editorial feature, is concerned with selection of objects and construction of a scene to fit a page format, the parameters of the space are defined by the shape and size of the magazine and whether the image will be used in portrait or landscape format.

This comparison may seem tenuous, but in order to understand styling as a creative position, and not merely reduce the process to choosing clothing to compliment a body it could be considered necessary to examine the cognitive and physical process more closely.

The Seventeenth century painter, Vermeer, is known for his careful placement of objects, as well as his use of natural light. A knowledge of how to construct a scene using objects and taking into account how light will fall upon the skin, folds in clothing and attention to details such as the use of the now clichéd pearl earring are absolutely essential in constructing a styled image.

This notion of the process and practice of styling being rooted within the art making process as much as the design process is underpinned by practice based research undertaken by the authors of the paper. Jennifer Anyan is a practising artist and stylist. Working on a recent project, an exhibition and publication titled Embodied Memories, has allowed re-evaluation of the role of artist and stylist:

When using five of the seven pieces for the shoot with the model, I was working within the realm of the fashion stylist or creative director. Directing the photographic

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style and therefore the photographer is perhaps one part of the process that would be labelled 'creative direction'; controlling the image beyond the styling, as in the instance of this project, for which the concept is mine, perhaps it is more pertinent to think of my role as all encompassing 'artist'. Part of my exploration here is into the function of the stylist in terms of the process, beyond the conventional, commercial, brand-tied role. However, during this process I acted as fashion stylist and creative director, but found being artist 'trumped' every other creative position as having the ultimate authorship. (Anyan 2011)

Having been commissioned as an artist and fashion stylist by the John Hansard Gallery, Anyan was able to explore how the roles of artist and stylist differ and merge, in terms of purely image-making process. However, as an artist, what prevailed was an impossibility to ever move beyond the position of artist, as artist has the ultimate authorship, in terms of responsibility for the overall project, concept and images produced. When decisions needed to be made while shooting the garments, if there was any doubt, the position of artist was the one reverted to in making a final decision. This may have been partly because the project was commissioned by a contemporary art gallery, and so anchored by the art context. However, it could be argued that without the tie to a commercial brief, the process of styling is able to move further into the sphere of art practice, in terms of the decision making process; the artist is not tied to a brief and therefore concept and/or aesthetics are the overriding concerns. In terms of the process undertaken to produce the work for the Embodied Memories project, there was a grey area, where the practice could not be distinguished as either an art practice or a styling practice, unless tethered to a specific outcome:

In constructing the raincoat collar, was I working as an artist or a stylist? Does this depend upon the final use of the collar? A fashion shoot and art installation – perhaps this is the point of the process in which my roles become indistinguishable. (Anyan, 2011)



Cilla's Cape with Red Hair, Embodied Memories 2011. Artist and Stylist Jennifer Anyan,
Photographer Chris Overend



Eva's Raincoat (detail), Embodied Memories 2011. Artist and Stylist Jennifer Anyan, Photographer Chris Overend

In an attempt to further define the creative process of the stylist, Philip Clarke has commissioned a number of practicing fashion stylists to document their working routine and research process whilst producing a single photographic image. The stylists are each given the same, reasonably open-ended, brief:

Produce one styled photographic image, considering the following requirements:

- The shot must include a model.
- The model must be wearing a black dress.
- The image must be photographed in a studio environment, against a black, grey or white Colorama background.
- The image can be portrait or landscape in format.
- Make-up and hair styling is unrestricted.
- Propping and use of accessories is unrestricted.
- The set can be decorated, customised or modified.
- The dress can be decorated, customised or modified.

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It is the stylist's responsibility to source a photographer for the shoot (Clarke 2011)

Clarke was keen to contact fashion stylists who have been working professionally on commercial or editorial projects. Although the brief could potentially be considered limiting, the lack of commercial considerations (target readership, client requirements, magazine style) or prescribed theme requires a different approach to that of a typical editorial commission. A stylist, unless producing test shots or work for their portfolio, would rarely work without a prescriptive brief, they would hardly ever be granted creative freedom. Even portfolio work would be produced with a particular target market in mind, it would be tailored to suit the requirements of the clients that the stylist aspires to work for.

Each participant was asked to keep a journal record or document their thought processes and visual research in a sketchbook. Each stylist will be interviewed about the creative process and the final outcome. The aim of the project, culminating in an exhibition of the photographic images and presenting the outcome of ethnographic research, is to encourage stylists to question their own creative process, examining how they research and develop ideas, to consider what 'styling' involves.

The project also aims to explore in more depth, the working relationships that contribute to the successful production of fashion imagery. The creative dynamic between the stylist and photographer is a particular concern. Addressing the issue of 'ownership' without dwelling on the legal issue of photographers' rights, the project will examine each party's contribution and consider the degree of creative input, how tasks are allocated and whether either party feels that the creative process has differed from that of a professional project.



Black Dress. Stylist Philip Clarke. Photographer Louise McArdle.



Black Dress. Stylist Anna Pichowski. Photographer Ted Park.

Styling and hypermodernity

A focus of Clarke's research is consideration of the inherently commercial nature of professional styling, to consider how the stylist functions without being driven by the demands and constraints of a commercial working environment. It has been suggested that the increased necessity for the stylist, as *arbiter*, has been born from an accelerated shift towards a consumption-driven society.

When interviewed by Tamsin Blanchard in 2002, Carine Roitfeld (the editor of French Vogue) commented on the increasing demand for stylists. At the time, Roitfeld claimed that

the ‘homogenisation’ of design had lead to designers relying on the stylists’ knowledge and instinct about the relevance of fashion trends to ensure that they are producing collections that the public will buy (Blanchard 2002).

The rise of the stylist has occurred in tandem with that of the internet and global media. In a time when an increasing proportion of the global population has the ability to instantly upload images to the web from their mobile phone, as the world has become increasingly visual and instant, the presentation of merchandise and the maintenance of a consistent brand identity (or consistently changing, if this is expected of your brand) is an ongoing concern.

Despite acknowledging the dearth of references to the stylist in contemporary literature it is worth noting that Frederic Jameson paid lip service to the term ‘styling’ in a commercial context in the foreword to Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition* in 1984:

There is here reproduced something of the celebration of modernism as its first ideologues projected it – a constant and ever more dynamic revolution in the languages, forms and tastes of art, not yet assimilated to the commercial revolutions in fashion and commodity styling we have since come to grasp as an immanent rhythm of capitalism itself (Jameson 1984 p xvi).

Two decades later, in *Hypermodern Times*, Sebastien Charles suggested that "it was with the extension of the logic of fashion to the entire body of society, when society as a whole was restructured in accordance with the logic of seduction, of permanent renewal and marginal differentiation, that the postmodern world emerged”, but goes on to discuss how society has moved beyond Lyotard’s version of postmodernity, that it had become *hypermodern* (2005), an amplified version of the world he described. Gilles Lipovetsky further defines the concept of hypermodernity introduced by Charles:

We have reached the moment when the commercialisation of lifestyles no longer encounters any structural, cultural or ideological resistances, and when the spheres of social and individual life are reorganized as function of the logic of consumption...individuals deprived of any transcendent meaning, hold opinions which are less and less clear cut and more and more fluctuating (2005, p.15)

In Twenty-first century society we have more instant access to fashion information and imagery than ever before. When Lady Gaga announced on social network Twitter that her single ‘Bad Romance’ would be premiered during the live stream of the Alexander McQueen Spring/Summer 2010 catwalk show, so many people tried to view it that the site crashed. The Internet has also enabled geographically wider fashion consumption. Within moments of the Duchess of Cambridge first appearing in her Alexander McQueen wedding dress, the discount shopping site the Outnet emailed shoppers on its mailing lists a discount on

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Alexander McQueen clothing, an attempt to capitalise on consumer desire to share in the occasion.

With this abundance of information, imagery and opportunity the role of the stylist has become necessary to provide guidance in navigating through the fashion sphere, marrying our vision of the self we aspire to be with the garments and accessories we require to construct it visually. The fine artist, Shezad Dawood, who creates 'styled' photographic and filmed scenarios, discusses how her own work addresses the concerns of people living in hypermodern (or as Bourriaud define it, altermodern) society:

The current crisis of perception makes this all the more evident: that our failure to understand the multiple sign, rather than its concrete appearance is the source of both anxiety and auto- destruct.

Taste is not autonomous (this has been written about extensively by Bourdieu and Simmel, amongst others); through fashion magazines and blogs we are offered guidance, shown how to select from the vast array of available products in order to consume in such a way that we feel reinforced as individuals. Shopping has become an activity of self affirmation, one role of the stylist is to demonstrate how fashion can be used to enable us to construct the self we aspire to.

...the self is formed in an interaction with objects – including other subjects as well -in the world, and consumption offers rich opportunities for such interaction (Svendson, 2006, p117)

Bourdieu (1986) saw taste as a hidden power. However, in the Twenty-first century, values have changed and we accept taste and visual literacy as commercial skills. The 'commercial revolutions in fashion and commodity styling' (Jameson 1984 p xvi) that shaped the postmodern world have contributed to the development of the version of hypermodern society defined by Lipovetsky and Charles (2005).

As values have changed, along with world economies, countries such as the UK, can no longer compete on a large scale in making and manufacture and so creative output has become one of the country's most economically successful areas. This has led to an increase in the range of creative courses offered in further and higher education and an increase in businesses with a creative and conceptual focus.

The stylist holds a position that, in terms of creative process, has some crossover with the processes of the fashion designer and artist. However, the role of stylist is also a unique position in its own right, with influence and critical engagement. As the role of the stylist continues to be defined and as consumer culture continues to evolve, the creative output of

stylists may be considered as parallel to, or even more influential than, that of designers, photographers and artists.

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