

FASHION TALKS

by **Ekaterina Kalinina**
photos **Ute Langkafel**



“We must not forget that an object is the best messenger of a world above nature.”

Roland Barthes, 1972¹

In Shane Meadows’s film *This Is England* (2006), which portrays skinhead subculture in Britain in the 1980s, the twelve-year-old schoolboy Shaun (played by Thomas Turgoose) becomes a member of the skinhead scene. The group he joins is apolitical and fashion-oriented: it includes both white and black members, who spend their free time hanging around. The process of his initiation involves a change of behavior, music preferences, hairdo, and outfit. The symbol of his transformation is perhaps the purchase of a pair of Dr. Martens boots. As soon as all the necessary elements of his “uniform” as a skinhead are in place, the other members recognize him as one of them.

Starting in the late 1950s, when England’s postwar economic boom led to increased purchasing by many working class kids, inspired by American and British music, actors, and Carnaby Street, youth groups developed their own behaviors and styles, with outfits ranging from the practical, such as boots and jeans, to the more aspiring and elegant, such as dancehall suits. These youths, usually referred to as *mods*, were known for their interest in fashion and music, but also for their violent behavior. When the mods started to fragment in the 1960s, a skinhead culture began to emerge, identified by shorter hair, a more pronounced working class image, and a fondness for ska, rocksteady and early reggae music. Early skinheads were not necessarily part of any political movement, but by the 1970s some of them had aligned themselves with National Front and their violence became more

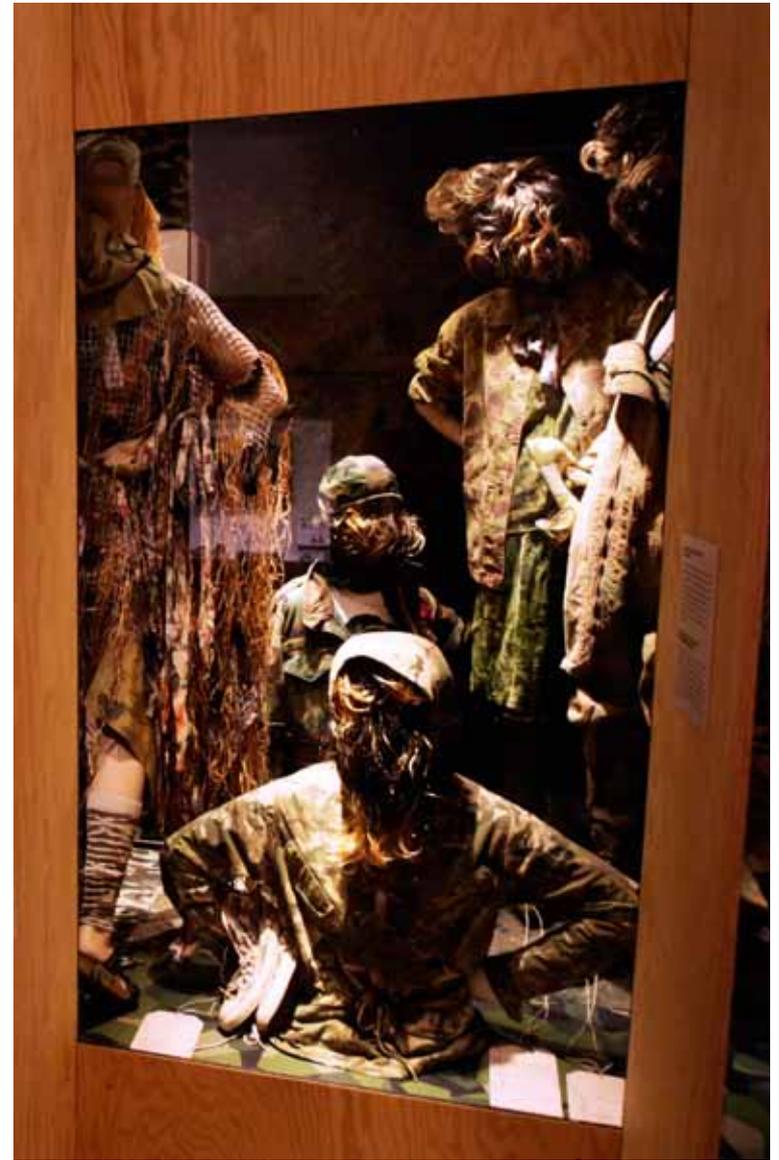
political and directed towards immigrants. Largely because of its portrayal in the mass media, the skinhead subculture was viewed as one that promoted racism and neo-Nazism, although there were anti-racist as well as merely apolitical youth among them.

This complex evolution of youth cultures, accompanied by media scandal and ambiguous relations with consumer-goods industries, led Dick Hebdige to regard subcultures as forms of resistance to authorities and the dominant social standards.² Individuals who shared a feeling of being neglected by those standards came together and developed a sense of group identity. Scholars have pointed out, quite rightly, that rebellious youth signaled their group membership through distinctive and symbolic appropriation of visible status and cultural markers, such as accessories, clothing, music, mannerisms, and argot. But even though the mods, rockers, punks and other subcultures were described in the media as “aggressive” and “subversive”, they nevertheless became incorporated into the mainstream: as Stuart Hall pointed out, media not only registered their resistance, but also normalized them within the dominant mythology.³ Meanwhile, the conversion of the subcultural signs – such as music and dress codes – into mass-produced consumer goods undermined their rebellious meaning. I will nevertheless argue that the nature of these subcultures was first and foremost about *consumption*, because they intentionally communicated “through commodities even if the meanings attached to those commodities are purposefully distorted or

overthrown”.⁴ Thus it is almost impossible to find a clear-cut distinction between commercial exploitation and the creative appropriation of consumer goods constructed by the subcultures. But at the same time it becomes evident that it is the *way* and the *context* in which commodities are used that mark subcultures in relation to consumer industries. Youth cultures revive and transform fashion items and patterns of behavior by relocating them into the contemporary context and ascribing to them new meanings through different use. Through this unconventional or unexpected use, youth cultures question the predominant values and social order. Thus rebellion does not necessarily have to be violent: any unconventional interpretation of, for instance, gender differences, mediated through dress codes and ways of life, can potentially appear in a list of subcultures, which undergoes great changes daily.

THE EXHIBITION *Fashion Talks: Fashion as Communication*, which was shown for several months at the Museum for Communication, Berlin,⁵ was designed to explore – by looking at the messages conveyed by clothes – how people deal with fashion, both individually and collectively. Accompanied by Vera Franke, one of two curators, I took a stroll through the exhibition. Starting with the illustrated timeline *Style Stones*, which showed how closely the history of fashion has been interwoven with important historical events, such as the feminist movement, the Olympic Games and the two World Wars, I passed between a pair of

Fashion is the outside of consumer society. The inside may well be uniformity.



mirrors that confronted me with my own reflection. Like many others, I was forced first to reflect upon my own image, as well as others', before starting my journey in the world of communication through fashion.

STANDARDIZING IDENTITY

The word *fashion* originates from Latin *facio*, which means making or doing and refers to a process. "To fashion" implies a conscious activity of self-reflection and construction of one's identity. Identity is composed in turn of both individual characteristics and affinity to a group (or groups). Thus what a person seeks to express by his or her appearance is individuality on the one hand and membership of a certain class or a social group on the other. By leading into the exhibition with a uniform, the curators elegantly indulged themselves in a complex topic of identity construction by means of commodities.

For centuries uniform dress functioned as a symbolic instrument of both inclusion and exclusion, maintaining strong hierarchies within a society. To this day the highly codified language of uniforms remains accessible only to those who have the knowledge to recognize the signs and codes of belonging and distinction. But who ever said contemporary fashion doesn't function according to the same rules? Reading labels and almost invisible designer signatures in everyday dress is a rather difficult task, which requires keeping abreast of style changes and monitoring the latest collections.

With a postman's attire as an illustration of a uniform in the more common sense, the curators initiated a series of associations between modern status markers (such as labels, headphones, and glasses) and more conventional elements of uniform dress (such as buttons, epaulets, and textile colors). Today status-manifesting signs are very diverse and cannot be reduced to epaulets. In the age of advertising and electronic media, anything we possess can serve as a sign of symbolic or economic capital: from drinking water brands and real estate to the number of stars of eBay accounts and number of friends on Facebook.

VISITORS TO THE *Fashion Talks* exhibition were invited to request the addition of new youth cultures that they thought were not included in the existing database by filling in a form on an old-fashioned typewriter. The notion that urban youth cultures are laboratories for new trends runs through the whole exhibition, showing how contemporary designers and mainstream fashion brands seek out certain subcultural styles for commercial purposes in order to capitalize on their subversive allure for larger consumer groups. The adaptation of initially shocking and distinctive punk-style clothing by mass-market fashion brands perfectly illustrates this mechanism, and paves the way for the curators to open a discussion on *strategies of fashion marketing*, involving pop and celebrity culture, DIY, retro and vintage, changing beauty standards, politics and social engagement. For example, the commercial exploitation of the DIY trend as a marketing strategy

found its expression in *colliers de chien* (paper bracelets by Hermes), available for download and, at least, free of charge. Meanwhile, the *Fendi DIY Baguette Bag*, a woven, unfinished *Fendi Baguette* with everything necessary to complete it, was priced at "only" \$995 at Net-a-Porter.com. The expensive opportunity to have your own one-of-a-kind designer bag is a perfect illustration of how personalization, used commercially, is turned into industrial pseudo-individualism.

3 IN 1: JEANS, TARTAN, AND CAMOUFLAGE AS ORIGINALS AND SARTORIAL OBJECTS OF DESIRE

The term *jeans* comes from the name of the city of Genoa, Italy, where cotton fabric was produced and exported to the rest of Europe. Originally manufactured as work clothes for gold-hunters, jeans became one of the basic items in the wardrobe of many youth gang members across the Western



For each subculture, there is a need for it to distinguish itself. And exclude others.

hemisphere in the 1950s, after being popularized by James Dean in Nicholas Ray's film *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955). If jeans in the 1950s communicated open rebellion, nowadays they are a more or less universal uniform, suitable for any occasion, from business meetings to beach volleyball games.⁶

Associating the history of jeans styles (which are currently dominated by a craze for vintage and worn-out looks) with cultural trends, the exhibition commented on the dramatic results of the production of jeans with a vintage twist. For example, producing a pair of jeans consumes an enormous amount of water, with damaging consequences in parts of the world that suffer from water shortages. This is one of the reasons why some jeans producers are researching more ecological methods of manufacturing. Moreover, the huge demand for jeans that appear worn has led to an increased use of sandblasting, which causes deadly illnesses among workers.

ANOTHER INTERESTING part of the exhibition involved tartans, woven patterns of intersecting horizontal and vertical bands in various colors. Tartans as we know them today were widely adopted in Scotland from the 16th century on: the earliest illustration of Scottish soldiers wearing plaid dates back to 1631.⁷ In the early 18th century, when rivalry with England turned into outright rebellion, tartans became a symbol of patriotic unity against the English. Recognizing this, the English Dress Act of 1746 after the Battle of Culloden banned tartans in civilian circles, although they were still allowed in the Highland regiments of the British Army. Although the ban was repealed in 1782, it was King George IV's official visit to Scotland in 1822 that signaled a real change in public attitudes to tartan. Almost overnight, tartan dress became highly fashionable.⁸

The notion that tartans always served to distinguish families is incorrect. Tartans were originally associated with a district or a region, and only gradually came to refer to families or clans.⁹ In modern times, *trade tartans* have been used for decorative and commercial purposes, while *commemorative tartans* are commissioned for anniversaries, events, or institutions.¹⁰ The Diana Memorial tartan, presented in the exhibition, was launched after the death of Princess Diana in 1997 to benefit her charities. Some significant development in the design and use of tartans has been seen in the growth of *corporate tartans*, which promote goods of Scottish origin on global markets. Sports-related tartans have also proved successful, perhaps because the bond among fans is as passionate as any family ties. The most celebrated examples of the use of tartans in the fashion industry are found in the 1993–1994 Vivienne Westwood collection *Anglomania*, which appear to have been inspired by the uniforms of Scottish regiments, and in Alexander McQueen's exploration of Scottish dress and its political history, as well his own Scottish heritage, in several of his collections (*Highland Rape*, 1995; *Widows of Culloden*, 2006–2007).

Having been appropriated by a number of subcultures, tartans became increasingly detached from Highland dress, and the checked patterns lost any association with Scotland. Burberry check, introduced in 1924 and originally used as a coat lining, lost its association with the upper class after being copied thousands of times. The *profile drift* that occurred

after Burberry became associated with the chav subculture forced Burberry to launch a rebranding campaign.

While tartans originated as a symbol of distinction, camouflage (from the French word *camoufler*; to disguise), originally served to let the wearer go unnoticed by blending with the surroundings or resembling something else. Before the 20th century, most army uniforms were made of bright colors in order to be easily distinguished from the enemy in combat situations. Also, if an army had a reputation as a fierce fighting unit, the very sight of the uniform might strike fear into the enemy. But with the use of firearms of increasing range and accuracy, brightly colored uniforms became easy targets on the battlefield.

DURING WORLD WAR I, several artists inducted into military service produced camouflage designs. The natural world of animals, insects, and plants served as inspiration. The French Cubist artist André Mare (1885–1932) designed camouflage schemes used on land, while at sea Norman Wilkinson's (1878–1971) dazzle patterns were meant to confuse enemy gunners about the speed, range, and heading of warships and troop carriers. Indeed, after the two World Wars, demand for new design was high and creativity flourished. Military camouflage patterns penetrated into conventional fashion from World War I onward. Certain contemporary subcultures, such as the junglists, a UK-based drum-and-bass youth culture originating in West Kingston, Jamaica, incorporate camouflage into their styles. Today camouflage is appropriated across the whole spectrum of fashion, from the high end to mass-market brands. Designer labels market "urban camouflage", fashionable garments, evening gowns, and accessories with a "camo" touch, playing on its original associations with disguise and power. Today's "urban camouflage", by serving a desire to stand out and show off, has reversed the patterns' original purpose.

THE MEDIUM IS THE MESSAGE

The curators' decision to give designer pieces priority over expensive multi-media installations paid off. The simple but functional design of the exhibition space gave it an alternative Berlin look and a slightly relaxed industrial atmosphere.

The exhibition succeeded elegantly in conveying important messages: it presented fashion as a cultural phenomenon and a system of signification through which society's experiences, order, values, and beliefs are communicated. By establishing *uniformity* as a basic principle of fashion, clearly seen throughout the exhibition, the curators encouraged visitors to reflect on questions of individuality and conformity, personal and group identity. After its presentation at the beginning of the exhibition, the uniform serves as a reference point for successive themes. It kicks off a di-



ologue between original and copy, for example, in which the uniform is first presented in its explicit sense, then transplanted into the sphere of subcultures, where the notion of a uniform has been redefined to serve principles of exclusion and inclusion according to people's interests, political views, class, and work situation.

At the same time, the exhibition illustrated the principle of mixing, restyling, and recycling by bringing together designer pieces, elements of uniforms and second-hand clothes. Shuffling and mixing meanings by putting together elements in a seemingly random, non-compatible manner – and giving total freedom to individual expression and non-verbal communication through fashion objects – became the apogee of the exhibition.

Fashion Talks convincingly hammers down the last nail in the debate on who sends the message: the consumer, media, the designer, or the manufacturer. Indeed, meaning is created by the society as a whole through a constant process of non-verbal communication by means of clothing. Moreover, the medium of fashion is a message of its own. Its very existence signifies long-lasting trends of change, migration, globalization, ecology, individualism, identity, gender, and appearance. This excursion into the world of fashion and identity made me realize that a little bit of courage in picking and mixing clothing items would do my image good. ✖

references

- 1 Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, New York 1972.
- 2 Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, London 1979.
- 3 Stuart Hall, "Culture, the Media and the 'Ideological Effect'", in James Curran et al. (eds.), *Mass Communication and Society*, London 1977.
- 4 Quoted in K. Gelder and Sara Thornton (eds.), *The Subcultures Reader*, London 1997, p. 133.
- 5 Formerly the German Postal Museum.
- 6 James Sullivan, *Jeans: A Cultural History of an American Icon*, London 2006.
- 7 Jeffrey Banks and Doria de la Chapelle, *Tartan: Romancing the Plaid*, New York 2007.
- 8 Iain Zaczek and Charles Phillips, *The Complete Book of Tartan: A Heritage Encyclopedia of Over 400 Tartans and the Stories that Shaped Scottish History*, Wigston, Leicestershire 2011.
- 9 Zaczek and Phillips, op. cit., p. 20.
- 10 From an early stage tartans have been classified by purpose. For more details see Zaczek and Phillips, op. cit., p. 15.