

In rather more recent times, traditional class structures have become blurred and critics like G. Field and G. McCracken⁶³ have concluded fashion is now characterised by a much more diffused structure without clear overall leaders (see also H. Blumer, D. Crane⁶⁴).⁶⁵ In a much more complex society, it has been noted for example that upwardly mobile groups tend to adopt the new status markers to differentiate themselves from the groups subordinate to themselves (i.e. the groups from which they emerged) while the very highest status groups can be indifferent to the latest fashions and thus are neither initiators nor followers of fashion.⁶⁶ Critics have also noted that fashion today can move in a number of different directions: while artists or designers may still inspire others to adopt a new fashion, inspiration can just as easily come from certain adolescent subcultures or from lower socio-economic groupings.⁶⁷ Many contemporary theorists have noted how adolescents for example - even those from poorer backgrounds - may be among the

⁶³ G. Field, The Status Float Phenomenon: The Upward Diffusion of Innovation, *Business Horizons*, Elsevier, vol. 13(4), 1970, pp. 45-52.

G. McCracken, The Trickle-Down Theory Rehabilitated in: Solomon, M. (ed), *The Psychology of Fashion*, Lexington Books, Lexington, MA, USA, 1985, pp 39-54.

⁶⁴ H. Blumer, Fashion: From Class Differentiation to Collective Selection, *The Sociological Quarterly*, Vol 49, Issue 4, Fall 2008, pp. 275 – 291.

D. Crane, *Fashion and Its Social Agendas: Class, Gender and Identity in Clothing*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL, USA, 2000.

D. Crane, Diffusion Models and Fashion: A Reassessment, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol 566, No. 1, 1999, pp. 13-24.

⁶⁵ It should also be pointed out that the greater consistency of media throughout the world is creating a more homogenised world with regard to fashion. One could think that this observation would counter the statement that there is more diffused structure, but to date its impact has been mixed. While clothing such as suits and ties for men and jeans have become prevalent throughout most of the world, there are many examples of some populations becoming more strongly attached to their local customs and dress styles for example recently there have been increases in the Muslim women wearing the hijab or burka. In part this has been a reaction to the incursion of western culture being rejected by Muslim populations.

⁶⁶ It is suggested by Barnard (M. Barnard, *Fashion as Communication*, Routledge, London, 1996, p. 10.) that some extremely upscale groups (His example is the English Royal family.) who maintain a very consistent look regardless of the fashion of the day. These he labels as 'anti-fashion.' In this example, he notes that Prince Charles, his father and his children all dress in similar styles. It is also interesting to note that much of the Royal families furniture is much the same as that produced in the late C18th. There could be a number of reasons for this. It could represent an evolution of the fashion process from a top down diffusion to a mixed source diffusion or it could simply mean that these few examples have refused to participate in the fashion system. During the time of this thesis, the late C18th the process was at the early stages of the change of this diffusion from a top down system.

⁶⁷ G. McCracken, The Fashion System in L. Welters and A. Lillethun (eds) *The Fashion Reader*, Berg, Oxford, 2007, pp. 90-92.

strongest and earliest followers of the latest luxury fashion.⁶⁸ This process of diffusion is not top down but has been labelled “trickle across” by C. King⁶⁹ and later described a “status float phenomenon” by G. Field.⁷⁰ King argues that now diffusion takes place within social groups as well as across different groups and it also moves in all directions – from top down to bottom up and from one group to another of equal status.⁷¹

C. King also talks of different social groups having their own opinion leaders or communication innovators.⁷²

D. Crane argues that the process of diffusion probably evolved over time; from the very centralized form that was present in the C19th (for example) to the present day. She goes on to suggest that one major shift occurred in the 1960's.

“Until the 1960's, fashion diffusion followed the top-down model and was highly centralized. From the middle of the nineteenth century, Paris was the centre for women's fashion, while London was the centre for men's styles.”⁷³

⁶⁸ D. Crane, Diffusion Models and Fashion: A Reassessment, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, pp. 13-24.

A. De La Haye and C. Dingwall, *Surfers, Soulies, Skinheads, and Skaters: Subcultural Style from the Forties to the Nineties*, Overlook Press, Woodstock, NY, 1996.

G. McCracken, The Trickle-Down Theory Rehabilitated. In M. Solomon (ed.), *The Psychology of Fashion*, pp. 39-54.

⁶⁹ C. King, "Fashion Adoption: a Rebuttal to the 'Trickle Down Theory'", in G. Sproles, (ed), *Perspectives of Fashion*, Burgess Publishing Company, Minneapolis, MN, 1963, pp.31-9.

⁷⁰ G. Field, The Status Float Phenomenon: The Upward Diffusion of Innovation, *Business Horizons*, Elsevier, vol. 13(4), 1970, pp. 45-52.

⁷¹ Two examples of non-top down diffusion of fashion in clothes are:

1. The designs of many of the modern trainer shoes are known to have come from research conducted in the poor African-American areas of NYC.
2. Trousers that sit low on a person's body sprung from gangs in LA who, upon leaving prison, were forced to wear trousers that were too large for them. Others emulated them, because of the fact that ex-prisoners were held in high esteem amongst other gang members and to other people in their socio-economic group who wanted to associate themselves with gangs. It has since spread to the middle class throughout the United States as well as in Europe.

⁷² C. King, "Fashion Adoption: a Rebuttal to the 'Trickle Down Theory'", in G. Sproles, (ed), *Perspectives of Fashion*, pp. 31-9.

⁷³ D. Crane, Diffusion Models and Fashion: A Reassessment, p. 17.

The cultural critic, Walter Benjamin also describes how fashion changed over time, comparing the Middle Ages when clothing merely “reinforced social hierarchy”⁷⁴ to the modern times (Walter Benjamin was writing in the 1930s) when clothing was, as he describes it, a “constant striving for “novelty.”⁷⁵ The other change Benjamin noted was the modern emphasis on the fashion of youth⁷⁶.

However, one of the earliest times suggested by D. Crane when the diffusion changed from top down to bottom up was perhaps just after the French revolution – a period which relates closely to that at issue in this thesis. It was during this period that the mode of dress was shaped by the

“...principals of liberty and equality, taking its cues from the rural and sporting dress rather than the royals and celebrities.”⁷⁷

In fact during this period, people purposely dressed down, in order to disassociate themselves from the ruling classes and the royal family. D. Crane points out another

⁷⁴ In some cases this ranking was reinforced by laws that dictated that only people of a certain rank could dress in a particular way through sumptuary laws (L. Welters and A. Lillethun (eds) *The Fashion Reader*, p. 6.) S. Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, The MIT Press, London, 1997, p. 96.

⁷⁵ S. Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, p. 96.

⁷⁶ Obviously, this does not directly relate to the time of this thesis, however it suggests that fashions did change over time and that at some point between the two periods (the Middle Ages and the 1930’s) it shifted from being a strict marking of social and political position to a youth obsessed, constant striving for novelty. It suggests that the C18th is somewhere between these two extremes, which most observations support.

⁷⁷ It is possible that there is an earlier example that this process was changing before the French Revolution but still in the C18th. This example of this is the dress styles in both France and England. In both countries the example of the frock coat stands out as a time when there was an upward push from the middle class toward the upper classes. This actually became an issue even to Marie Antoinette, who changed her policy to allow men to visit her wearing these coats despite the fact that this insulted more conservative members of the ruling families (See A. Fraser, *Marie Antoinette, The Journey*, Weidenfield & Nicolson, London, 2001, pp. 208-209.) The wearing of the frock coat was symbolic of the new revolutionary thinking and was popular in the then new country of the United States.

Note: this coat has an interesting history, during the early part of the C18th in Britain and America, a *frock* was a loose men's coat for hunting or other country pursuits and was derived from the traditional working-class frock. Late in the eighteenth century, however, it changed into another variation with “a cutaway front without a waist seam”. Later, in the early C19th, this would further evolve into the standard dress coat with horizontally cutaway fronts worn for daytime wear and still later it would become the modern coat with tails for formal evening wear. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frock> accessed 10/11/08.

difference based on how clothing is manufactured which in turn drives differences in how the products are diffused through to the consumer. Those making clothing at the top end of the market rely more on top down diffusion, while those industrial producers who are manufacturing for the other segments frequently rely on the bottom up diffusion model.

In terms of the period addressed in this thesis, C. Sargentson herself points out that there are theorists who do not agree with the idea that people follow fashion in order to emulate the elite classes. Instead it is suggested that sometimes a fashionable object (for example) is taken up because it is simply a useful object.⁷⁸ One could argue that the popularity of writing furniture spread, for example, because they performed a useful function, not because the elite households purchased them.

It is very clear that in the C18th, fashion was more localized. The primary centre for clothing as well as design fashion was Paris and Versailles, as we shall see. London however was growing in its influence but its effect was still largely confined to England. Furthermore, the furniture this thesis addresses was definitely produced for a very small group at the luxury end of the market, at a point that marked only the beginning of any type of large scale commercial production in the furniture trade.

Fashion of course, can also be regarded as a form of communication. Crane in *Fashion and Its Social Agendas: Class, Gender and Identity* (Crane, 2000)⁷⁹ and Barnard, in *Fashion as Communication* (Barnard, 1996)⁸⁰ are advocates of this view, who agree that clothing communicates all that is necessary to define us as individual members of different social

⁷⁸ See C. Sargentson, *Merchants and Luxury Markets: The Marchands Merciers of Eighteenth-Century Paris*, P. 6. and C. Campbell's article Understanding Traditional and Modern Patterns of Consumption in Eighteenth-Century England: A Character-Action Approach in J. Brewer and R. Porter, *Consumption and the World of Goods*, Routledge, London, 1993, pp. 40-57.

An obvious example would be that a person tries a new hat that is fashionable among the upper class because it looks like it would be warmer or more comfortable – not because they want to be more like someone in a higher-class segment.

⁷⁹ D. Crane, *Fashion and Its Social Agendas: Class, Gender and Identity in Clothing*.

⁸⁰ M. Barnard, *Fashion as Communication*.

groups-signalling for example our age, gender, profession, ethnicity, religion and social class. Other less obvious details may signal our political and or cultural perspective. Barnard argues:

*"...clothing and dress constitute signifying systems in which a social order is constructed and communicated. They may operate in different ways, but they are similar in that they are the ways in which that social order is experienced, understood and passed on. They may be considered as one of the means by which social groups communicate their identity as social groups, to other social groups."*⁸¹

This is not to say that someone always deliberately sets out to determine what an item communicates - fashion also allows those outside the group to assign meaning to a look.

In defining such 'fashionable communication' some authors have gone so far as to identify characteristics that convey particular attributes: for example angularity equates to the masculine, the curvilinear equates to the feminine, dark colours equates to seriousness, lighter colours equate to the informal, etc.. However, such meanings may relate to a particular period of time or specific culture and may not transfer. According to F. Davis, clothing also tends to "under code" in that clothes are designed not to give clearly defined meanings, but approximations to an aesthetic code.⁸² It is clear that during the late C18th the perception those certain clothing items communicated to others. Marie Antoinette and others in her party would frequently refer to their clothing by using very specific metaphors. For example:

*"...a dress of stifled sighs covered with superfluous regrets... in the middle was a spot of perfect candour come-and-see buckles.... A bonnet decorated with fickle feathers and streamers of weebegone eyes."*⁸³

⁸¹ M. Barnard, *Fashion as Communication*, p. 69.

⁸² F. Davis, *Fashion, Culture, and Identity*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1992.

⁸³ G. D'Assailly, *Ages of Elegance: Five Thousand Years of Fashion and Frivolity*, MacDonald, London, 1968, p.139.

It is doubtful that this was a serious assignment of these specific meanings, instead they were probably represented playful interpretations based on the shifting romantic codes of courtly conduct. However, clothing was frequently used to identify a person's class or membership in an elite group, as was illustrated by the fact that friends of Marie Antoinette were upset when she allowed men to meet her wearing frock coat, which in some way indicated persons of a lower social status.⁸⁴

H. Blumer suggests a process that is similar to - but different from - that of the diffusion theorists. He agrees that it is usually an individual or specific group who initiate a new fashion and recognizes the historical shift of influence from the upper class as a source of inspiration for fashion to the avant-garde segments that launch fashion:

*"The efforts of an elite class to set itself apart in appearance take place inside of the movement of fashion instead of being its cause.... The fashion mechanism appears not in response to a need of class differentiation and class emulation, but in response to a wish to be in fashion, to be abreast of what has good standing, to express new tastes, which are emerging in a changing world."*⁸⁵

Contrary to G. Simmel and T. Veblen, H. Blumer believes that the 'elite' are not defined by class, but any group; perhaps rising singers or performers or perhaps 'early adopters' - a recent term used by C20th and C21st marketers to define the first people to try a new product (e.g. people who wait in line for hours and/or pay a higher price to be the first to own a particular product.)⁸⁶ H. Blumer identifies four different rules that govern the process of fashion:

1. Current fashions generally grow out of what immediately precedes them (in the 1960s for example dress hemlines kept getting shorter and shorter).

⁸⁴ A. Fraser, *Marie Antoinette, The Journey*, pp. 208-209.

⁸⁵ H. Blumer, *Fashion: From Class Differentiation to Social Selection*, p. 281.

⁸⁶ C. Sargentson speaks of a similar type of behaviour amongst the shoppers with the *Marchand Merciers*. The *Merciers* would sell products at full prices then slowly lower the price as the novelty of the type of item wore off. They would also commission variations in order to keep the line of products new and exciting. See: C. Sargentson, *Merchants and Luxury Markets: The Marchands Merciers of Eighteenth-Century Paris*, p. 32

2. However there are times when sudden changes occur that are unexpected (It has been pointed out that fads also occur this way – unexpectedly; however in the case of fashions they tend to last longer).
3. Fashion always relates to the current times.
4. Fashion depends upon the acceptance or rejection by a group of people who have a similar “collective taste”.⁸⁷

This latter idea is most important to H. Blumer which is why some have called his theory “The Collective Behaviour Model” in which fashion is an ongoing institutional process that is driven by the ‘elites’ and supported by the imitating members of particular groups as a form of collective behaviour.⁸⁸ The decision to copy a new fashion is based on educating everyone who is part of a particular social group over time. As the group becomes more alike in their thinking, the more they act in similar ways.⁸⁹

To conclude, the collective theory of fashion diffusion differs from the basic theory of diffusion. In both, certain leaders introduce the new fashion. However, while the Collective theory argues that once the leader establishes the direction, the trend is formed only as it becomes adopted among an increasing number of people; by contrast the theory of diffusion of innovations suggests that innovations are spread systematically from one social group to another.

As an art historian, Q. Bell did not so much attempt a theory of fashion, as critique current theories and suggests alternative interpretations. While most of his writing is not relevant to this discussion, the one thing that is important here is that counter to T. Veblen, and to a

⁸⁷ H. Blumer, *Fashion: From Class Differentiation to Social Selection*, p. 283.

⁸⁸ G. Sproles, *Behavioural Science Theories of Fashion*. In M. Solomon, (ed), *The Psychology of Fashion*, p. 57.

⁸⁹ Others, besides Blumer, who have put forth similar “Collective Behaviour” models of fashion include:

- O. Klapp, *Collective Search for Identity*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, NY, 1969.
- K. Lang and G. Lang, *Collective Dynamics*, Thompson Y. Crowell, NY, 1961.
- D. Robinson, *Style Changes: Cyclical, Inexorable, and Foreseeable*, *Harvard Business Review*, Vol 53, November-December, 1975, pp. 121-131.

lesser extent G. Simmel. Bell believed it was not just women who drove fashion, but that men also participated in the process.

The next 'theory' relevant to this thesis is that proposed by S. Bikhehandani, D. Hirshleifer and I. Welch. Their theory differs in that it does not attempt to explain all aspects of fashion but provides a different viewpoint by means of a mathematical model. Though it is limited in its explanation, it does attempt to explain how fashionable ideas are transferred from one individual or group to another, across and within social groups - and therefore does not follow the idea that fashions are diffused top down, from the upper classes to the rest of the population.⁹⁰ These authors also suggest a wide range of social factors affect the issue of transference, including such things as "stigma" or "peer pressure".

Finally it is perhaps useful to reference the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1930 –2002), one the more influential of the modern theorists. From an enormous data set collected from the cities of Paris and Lyon during the 1960's, P. Bourdieu developed a very complex theory of fashion. According to P. Bourdieu, fashion represents a type of code for social differentiation or distinction. Instead of identifying class structures as drivers of fashion, P.

⁹⁰ Their theory which they refer to as "Informational Cascades" is a mathematical model rooted in Game Theory and Stochastic Process. According to this approach, selections of a particular behaviour have some kind of value to each of the possible choices. People receive (frequently with imperfect) information from others and they make decisions to select a particular behaviour or object based on this information. As the information is transmitted from person to person (through whatever means that are available – visually, verbally etc.) , the probability of that behaviour repeating itself changes. If it is a positive transference then the result is that a fad or fashion will take place. If the transference is negative then the fad or fashion is stopped. Other factors enter into the equations to add to or detract from the probability of a selection such as "stigma" or "peer pressure" both of which either add or subtract from the probability of emulating the behaviour or making the acquisition. An example of their process as it applies to politics is the observation that strong early poll results will make a candidate for a particular office more acceptable to a population. This is used by Bikhehandani, Hirshleifer and Welch to explain how an unknown (Jimmy Carter) could beat a large group of known and very powerful candidates in the US presidential election of 1976. Carter did this by looking very strong in the first state primary election, which started a cascade effect on the subsequent state elections. This appears that this process was repeated in the recent US election when Barack Obama performed so well in the first primary election. The opposite occurred on the Republican side when Rudolf Giuliani focused on the first large state and ignored the running in several smaller, less influential states. The result was that the other candidates who won the smaller states dominated over Giuliani forcing him to step out of the election process. See S. Bikhehandani, D. Hirshleifer and I. Welch, A Theory of Fads, Fashion, Custom, and Cultural Change as Informational Cascades, pp. 992-1026.

Bourdieu talks about “cultural capital” which he describes as a commodity reproduced by society in individuals, primarily through education. Rather than class, P. Bourdieu talks in terms of dominant versus dormant social groups and the uniform desire to improve social status through the acquisition of cultural capital; through dress, speech, etc. Social status rests with those with greater cultural capital. Those individuals and groups more able to understand new fashions and more likely to adopt them are those who will accumulate the cultural capital necessary to succeed.

As can be seen, this model (unlike T. Veblen or G. Simmel’s for example) does not rest on a dominant or an upper class.⁹¹ P. Bourdieu’s work is also based on actual data; whereas most other theorist’s works have been largely based on observation and critical analysis. However, this use of this data brings its own problems. The data was collected in two major cities in Paris in the early 1960s and since that time, it might be argued that both education and the increasing proliferation of mass media may well have had conspired to undermine the value of cultural capital – at least in how it is understood by Bourdieu.

One aspect of fashion that has not been addressed completely is to do with *change*. As suggested above, fashion is intimately related to change. However, most often this change is based on ideas that have been presented in the past. As a result, fashion has a tendency to run in cycles, each cycle coming into being and achieving some level of popularity before it is dissipated by the next emergent cycle. This can be looked at in two ways: one look at fashion as a recirculation of ideas or one can look within each cycle and identify rehearsal and progression. The latter can certainly be seen (as will be shown) with the Neo-Classical ideas that were to resurface in England and France during the late C18th – and can even be seen to apply to neo-classical ideas that persist in contemporary architecture and furniture.

⁹¹ P. Bourdieu, (Translated from French by R. Nice), *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Routledge, London, 1986.

The process of change according to Sproles in *The Psychology of Fashion*⁹² is characterized by six steps.⁹³ The steps are:

1. Invention and Introduction: This is the source of the fashion inspiration and may be inspired by a designer, a manufacturer, an artist, an outside group, etc.
2. Fashion leadership: Once developed, the new fashion needs to have an individual or a group able to influence others into adopting it.
3. Increasing social visibility: This is the moment after a new fashion has become accepted within one group and has become noticed by other social groups.
4. Conformity within and across social groups: A fashion becomes established within a wider social group and it becomes the accepted mode; the mass media has generally accepted and promotes it.
5. Social saturation: Nearly everyone has adopted the fashion and the original group tires of it- setting the stage for its decline and the growth of a new idea.
6. Decline and Obsolescence: The fashion is discarded to be replaced by a new fashion.

There are two issues here with the research on fashion that need to be addressed. First of all most are based on observations (albeit by very skilled and thoughtful professionals) and not hard data. While it appears that they have probably identified many key components to fashion, they have not been verified by any quantitative research (The exception is the work of P. Bourdieu; but, as discussed before, there are issues with his work.)

The other concern that needs to be raised is that all of these theories were introduced in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries and as such they are most readily applicable to those periods. That does not mean to say that they cannot be helpful in interpreting the late C18th, as this thesis will hope to show. However, it does mean that we need to remind

⁹² M. Solomon (eds), *The Psychology of Fashion*, Lexington Books, Lexington, MA, USA, 1985.

⁹³ F. Davis, *Fashion, Culture, and Identity*, pp. 121-159.

ourselves that the late C18th differs in many ways from the present. Firstly, fashion was generally limited to the upper and middle classes and has limited impact upon the urban & rural working classes. In this respect, fashion in the C18th probably leaned more strongly toward the ‘downward diffusion’ model of fashion than it does today – H. Blumer for example believed that during this time it was only a downward diffusion process.

While not forgetting these limitations to the research on fashions there are a few conclusions that have helped to shape the subsequent chapters. First of all fashion is only relevant in a historical context. It is both part of a continuous growth and development based on earlier styles and generally a reaction to the fashionable style that immediately precedes it. In this sense, a new fashion is always initiated by something and does not just appear out of the blue; either an event (or a series of events) and/ or a set of conditions stimulate the start of a new fashion and allow it to grow. In order for a fashion to grow it also requires some kind of leadership and a receptive audience or group, in order for the new fashion to develop.⁹⁴ Finally, while it is clear that in the C21st, fashions are initiated from a number of different points and spread both within certain social groups and across other social groups, it did not take this form in C18th England and France, where a hierarchical, top down system prevailed.

In the next chapter (Chapter III, p. 118), this thesis will map the development of the Neo-Classical style in the late C18th against some of the theories discussed here. More specifically, it will demonstrate how the Neo-Classical style came to define the most fashionable furniture of the late C18th. However, before exploring these ideas, some of the issues relating to fashion in late C18th England and France will be addressed.

⁹⁴ Since this paper is only interested in the growth of a particular fashion – that of the Neo-Classical designs of furniture, it will not include in this discussion a section on the demise of a fashion.