

## The Method Research for Analyzing Contemporary Fashion Phenomena - Focused on Mass Culture Theory -

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### Abstract

*The purpose of this study is to indicate the framework to analyze the contemporary fashion phenomena taking on aspect as above by grafting the mass culture theory onto the study for fashion phenomena. The contemporary culture phenomena look like a same thing apparently, but various individual characters appeared in them. And all cultures are mixed in the name of mass culture, but the subordinate concepts which can classify the culture are still in existence. And this equally appear in the contemporary fashion, one of culture phenomena.*

*The concept of the contemporary mass culture can be explained with the taste culture, Gans' theory indicated, divided into highbrow culture, middlebrow culture, and lowbrow culture. And the phenomena of the contemporary mass culture also can be explained with globalization that came down to homogenization, regionalization, hybridization.*

*Key words : mass culture, taste culture, globalization.*

### I. Introduction

Costume is something that has a special moldability and inner value, while at the same time, can be used for each individual preference and need. However, not everyone that wears a certain type of costume are governed by the same logic nor do they have the same preferences. Therefore, costume cannot be explained as a general artistic ideology of a certain people nor as a phenomenon that appears only within a certain class. Rather, it should be explained as a comprehensive cultural phenomenon. Be that as it may, much research on costume still only focuses on its unique moldability or its aesthetic value.

On the one hand, this cultural phenomenon that encompasses the notions of anthropology and sociology as well as the concepts of social classes, the standard norm and aesthetic preference, in today's contemporary world can be better explained as a phenomenon of mass culture where these different concepts come to life. In other words, the mass culture of the latter 20th century there arose at the same time identification, localization and composition and the divisions between high culture, middle culture and lower culture still existed. However, these divisions do not stem from the concept of rank from the past, but from pure preference.

This same phenomenon can be found in the contemporary costume of today. In today's day and age there is the mixing of high fashion and

street fashion and the fashions of many countries influence and affect the fashions of another, but the divisions between high fashion, mass fashion and street fashion still exist and each country still has their own unique fashions that are influenced by their own unique societal phenomena. As follows, this report will examine the research on mass culture and introduce it into fashion research and present a paradigm that will analyze contemporary fashion phenomena.

This research uses the qualitative method that is used by the literary documents and research related to mass culture and by the newspaper and magazine articles related to fashion phenomena. This research will also be centered around 1990, a year that showed the many and diverse aspects of mass culture and fashion.

## II. Contemporary Mass Culture

### 1. Concept of Mass Culture

#### 1) Mass Culture

The exact concept and definition of mass culture differs between academic circles with the most common terms used being mass culture, popular culture, mass mediated culture, taste culture, etc. First, mass culture refers to the culture of the masses<sup>1)</sup>, a lower culture that is the opposite of high culture<sup>2)</sup> and the product of mass media and an over-consuming society<sup>3)</sup>. Secondly, popular culture, as a more private culture, is more inclusive and subtly more neutral<sup>4)</sup>. Third, mass mediated culture, the mass communication culture that was created artificially by the press, stated that the division between all cultures had been erased<sup>5)</sup>. Finally,

H. Gans stated that contemporary mass culture is made up of many taste cultures, each defined by its own tastes and preferences and therefore, making all the cultures equal<sup>6)</sup>. Of these different definitions, it was decided that H. Gans' outlook most accurately described contemporary mass culture. Therefore, a more specific explanation of H. Gans' taste culture will be explained here.

#### 2) Taste Culture

H. Gans stated that taste cultures included such things as music, art, design, literature and news and the media, political values, education, individual knowledge that described them. Therefore, Gans' taste culture has a wide and extensive meaning that can be used to designate all forms of culture. H. Gans also stated that taste culture can be differentiated into highbrow culture, middlebrow culture and lowbrow culture depending on the individual preferences. These three cultures are explained below.

First, highbrow culture refers to a very small minority of noble aristocrats with classical tastes who played an important creative role within one society. Secondly, the middlebrow culture is the taste culture of the middle class, those with a middle standard of living and a somewhat flexible economic status and the main users of mass media. Finally, the lowbrow culture is the taste culture of all those not included in the highbrow and middlebrow cultures. This class of people do not borrow anything from the other two cultures and, instead, has a tendency to create their own unique culture. This class of people also has a tendency to live out their dreams and desires through celebrities shown in

<sup>1</sup> Kangsu Lee, *Korean Mass Culture Theory* (Seoul:Peobmunsa, 1989), 14.

<sup>2</sup> T. S. Eliot, *Notes Towards a Definition of Culture* (London: Faber & Faber Limited, 1962), 43-44.

<sup>3</sup> D. MacDonald, "A Theory of Mass Culture", in *Mass Culture*, ed. by B. Rosenberg & D.M. White, (New York : The Free Press, 1957), 59.

<sup>4</sup> IISang Yu, *Massmedia and Opened World*, (Seoul: KeongIn Munwhasa, 1995), 329.

<sup>5</sup> M. Real, *The Mass Mediated Culture*, (New York : Prentice-Hall, 1977), 8-14.

<sup>6</sup> H. Gans, *Popular culture and High Culture*, (New York : Basic Books Inc., 1974), 21-30.

mass media. Interestingly, this culture also contains subcultures<sup>7</sup>.

This type of classification is not hierarchical, but are of equal value. Therefore, although it appears that all cultures are mixed together under the name of 'mass culture', within this concept of taste cultures, the classifications between cultures still exist and is a good way to describe contemporary circumstances.

## 2. Phenomena of Mass Culture

### 1) Characteristics of Contemporary Mass Culture

Research on mass culture that started in the 19th century with the introduction of mass society and mass media can be classified into three categories: criticism, affirmation and globalization. First, whereas E. V. Haag<sup>8</sup>, M. Horkheimer<sup>9</sup>, A. Hauser<sup>10</sup>, T. Adorno<sup>11</sup> and others claimed that high culture was in danger of deterioration by mass culture, they raised the criticism that this can only be taken advantage of by a small governing minority. On the other hand, Bell, D. M. White, H. Gans and others supported the fact that mass culture is a pluralistic cultural phenomenon that reflects the tastes of individuals and the cultures that they belong to<sup>12</sup>.

On the other hand, in 1990, a new form of research began that crossed national and cultural

boundaries and focused on reciprocal application. As a result, P. Croce explained contemporary mass culture as a 'cluster culture'<sup>13</sup>, D. Pearson as 'standardized diversity'<sup>14</sup>, R. Browne as 'new humanities'<sup>15</sup> and A. Berger as 'globalization'<sup>16</sup>. This did not mean that they believed in the oneness of all contemporary mass culture, but that they would combine and mix through the raising of individual and group characteristics. Of these, in order to describe the phenomenon of contemporary mass culture, 'globalization', the most vigorously rising theory after 1990, is most appropriate.

### 2) Globalization

In contrast to 'internationalization', which refers simply to the exchange between nations, 'globalization' refers to the process of forming a new globalized dimension through the reorganization of society. The characteristics of globalization that have been discussed up until now can be organized into analytical adjustments, rejection of black/white differentiations, simultaneous development with localization, diverse forms of coexistence and the diversification of the actor<sup>17</sup>. L. Roniger viewed globalization occurring through five steps: transnationalization, continentalization, regional translocalization, popular localization and hybridization. Once the final step had been reached, there would be the coexistence of the oneness of the

<sup>7</sup> H. Gans, *ibid*, 99-136.

<sup>8</sup> E. V. Haag, "Of Happiness and of Despair We Have No Measure", B. Rosenberg & D. M. White, *ibid*, 504-536.

<sup>9</sup> M. Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, (New York: Allen Lane, 1973), 143-167.

<sup>10</sup> A. Hauser, *The Philosophy of Art History*, (Cleveland: Cleveland Publishing, 1963), 339-346.

<sup>11</sup> T. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, (New York: Seabury Press, 1973), 151-156.

<sup>12</sup> D. M. White, & B. Rosenberg, *ibid*, (New York: Free Press, 1957), 13-21.

<sup>13</sup> P. Croce, "Erosion of mass culture", *Society*, 30/5, (1993), 12.

<sup>14</sup> D. E. Pearson, "Post-mass culture", *Society*, 30/5, (1993), 18-20.

<sup>15</sup> R. Browne, "Culture 'of the people, by the people, for the people'", *National Forum*, 74/4, (1994), 11-13.

<sup>16</sup> A. Berger, "Myth of mass culture", *Society*, 30/5, (1993), 25.

<sup>17</sup> KilSung Park, *Globalization*, (Seoul: Sabeoi Pipungsa, 1996) 58-72.

first step and the localization of the following step<sup>18)</sup>.

On the one hand, interest in the globalization of mass culture increased after the release of 'Theory, Culture, and Society', which dealt with global culture, in 1990. When this term first appeared, many people felt this to signify the oneness of global culture. P. Berger stated that 'global culture' refers to oneness of economy, oneness of value, oneness of American mass culture and the oneness of the Church and the ensuing process of oneness of all the people around the world<sup>19)</sup>.

On the other hand, J. Pieterse stated that this global culture does not refer to the unilateral homogeneity of one particular culture, but a process of hybridization whereby all cultures can influence and affect one another<sup>20)</sup>. J. Arnason also stated that as more global cultures form, the pluralism of globalization would deepen<sup>21)</sup> and R. Robertson stated that the globalization of mass culture refers to the process of 'glocalisation' in which there is more production and consumption by region of circulated technology and products<sup>22)</sup>. They explain the globalization of culture as a process whereby each culture mixes with one another while, at the same time, maintaining their own individual identity. While this was being neglected, this type of culture was acknowledged as having the value to exist and because it represents one part of the common entity that is shared by mankind can be referred to as globalization in the true sense of the word<sup>23)</sup>.

This type of globalization theory can be viewed in the same light by which H. Gans categorized mass culture, as well as lower cultures, as taste cultures and, thereby gave them equal standing.

Up until now, it was appropriate to explain the concept of mass culture as a taste culture and the phenomenon of contemporary mass society using the globalization theory. These concepts and theories will now be used as the basis for looking into the characteristics of contemporary fashion phenomenon.

### III. Contemporary Fashion

#### I. Characteristic of Contemporary Fashion

J. Finkelstein stated that fashion is the invention of desire and the joy that follows from it and the pastime of the imagination<sup>24)</sup>. He also stated that it is the one clear indicator of the changing tastes of this society based on consumption. Min-ja Kim stated that contemporary fashion is not a reflection of the events of society, but rather of our own individual tastes. When the universal mentality of this society matches the influence of individual tastes, the gathered mental system of individual preferences meets the preferences of society again. H.G. Blumer also examined closely the workings of a fashion mechanism as the tastes of the masses. He stated that in the fashion is formed and cultivated by the tastes of a group. In other words, fashion is not a reflection of status or differentiation, but the reflection of the wish to represent a new preference<sup>25)</sup>.

<sup>18</sup> L. Roniger, "Public life and globalization as cultural vision", *The Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology*, 32/3, (1995), 259-286.

<sup>19</sup> P. Berger, "Four faces of global culture", *The National Interest*, No.49, (1997), 23-31.

<sup>20</sup> J. Pieterse, "Globalization as Hybridization", *International Society*, 9/2, (1984), 177.

<sup>21</sup> J. Arnason, "Nationalism, Globalization, and contemporaryity", in M. Featherstone, *Global Culture: Nationalism, Globalization, and contemporaryity*, (New York: Sage, 1990), 140.

<sup>22</sup> R. Robertson, "Globalisation or Glocalisation", *Journal of International Communication*, 1/1, (1994), 5

<sup>23</sup> KilSung Park, *ibid*, 92-93.

<sup>24</sup> J. Finkelstein, *After a Fashion*, (Melbourne Univirsty Press, 1996), 39.

<sup>25</sup> H. G. Blumer, "Fashion", *International Encyclopaedia of Social Science*, Volume 5, (1978), 341-345.

According to the explanations above, the 20th century fashion phenomenon can be described as a mechanism that represents the preferences of an individual or a culture. Therefore, further research can be done on contemporary fashion through the linking of mass culture with the idea of taste cultures presented by H. Gans.

## **2. Concept of Contemporary Fashion**

H. Gans stated that mass culture consists of taste cultures that is further subdivided into a highbrow culture, a middlebrow culture and a lowbrow culture. The following is what results from the grafting of this ideology onto the fashion phenomenon.

### **1) High Fashion**

First, the highbrow culture is similar to high fashion. High fashion is created through the small minority of creative geniuses and displayed as collections and is worn by the upper elite whose refined and elegant tastes are always at the forefront. Collections are put on display twice a year through the Haute-Couture collection and the Pret-a-Porter collection to present the fashion styles for the following season. The majority of hair styles, makeup and accessories that are also put on display at that time are styles that cannot be easily selected or worn by the average person. What is emphasized here is that the artistic representations of those that lead the fashion phenomenon are displayed in the forms of art deco, cubism, pop art and other forms.

### **2) Mass Fashion**

Secondly, the middlebrow culture, as defined by H. Gans, can be correlated to ready-made clothes in the fashion industry. Min-ja Kim defined Haute-Couture as high culture and Pret-a-Porter as mass culture. In other words, Pret-a-Porter, that sought to create many high fashions as ready-made clothes and supply them to many people, popularized high fashion. However, Pret-a-Porter here represents the high class ready-made clothes made by Haute-

Couture designers and cannot be seen as mass culture. Therefore, the structure of ready-made clothes, termed mass fashion, can signify the fashion styles of fashion collections that have been popularized into a national brand of ready-made clothes.

### **3) Street Fashion**

Finally, lowbrow culture can be viewed in terms of a unique style that is different from high fashion and mass fashion, namely, subculture style and street style. Mods, hippies, punks and Rastafarians are just a few of the representative styles of the lowbrow culture that stand in opposition to the established culture. This culture includes the free style of costume known as street style, in which the style of clothes and even how the clothes are worn are very different to represent the wearers' individuality or without any particular standard of value or symbolism, this culture also seeks to imitate the styles of celebrities. Just as in lowbrow culture, this form of street style is usually led by the younger generation.

However, one thing to keep in mind here is that this classification does not mean that high fashion is superior to mass fashion, only that it represents the different tastes of those that wear these particular fashions. Also, according to H. Gans' taste culture ideology, high fashion can be borrowed by mass fashion and street fashion can also be borrowed by high fashion.

## **3. Phenomena of Contemporary Fashion**

It was mentioned earlier in this report that the phenomenon of mass culture in the latter part of 1990 can be summarized as globalization. As follows, there are a few connections that can be made between contemporary mass culture, a representative of globalization, and the fashion phenomenon.

### **1) Homogenization**

First is the oneness and the identification by which all cultures throughout the world, without regards to classes and regions, are becoming the

same. The industrial revolution in the fashion industry came with the invention of the loom. Europe, who had many colonies throughout the world, propagated her method of costume throughout the world through these colonies, such that Western wear became the standard norm of costume, while the costume of each nation came to be considered a traditional costume. Furthermore, in 1990, when diverse multimedia allowed for information to be shared simultaneously throughout the world, this oneness and homogeneity occurred more rapidly. Now, nobody has to go to Paris to take part in the fashion shows. We can turn to cable TV, satellite broadcasting or the Internet and watch the shows from the comfort of our own homes. Through various Internet sites, we can log on to find out what the hottest styles are in London, find out which items we need to imitate those styles, find out where we need to go and how much we need to pay to purchase those items and even purchase these items online. This sharing of information closes the gap between classes and regions and all persons, without regards to social class, are following the same fashion trend.

### 2) Regionalization

Secondly, is localization that allows cultures to maintain their own identities. This kind of localization can also be found in fashion. It can be said that the globalization of European fashion is the representative globalization phenomenon of fashion. European fashion, which opens in advance to all other fashion collections throughout the world, has always decided the fate of all fashion shows that open after it. However, with the opening of the recent New York Collection before the opening of any European Collection, the role of European fashion, which has, up until now, decided the trend of clothes throughout the world, has been dispersed and each nation is now coming forth

with their own regionally unique designs. The globalization phenomenon of minimalism, the worldwide fashion trend of 1996, can be used to explain why it became very popular in Korea, however the fact that the stick suit, an item which was popular throughout the world in this year, did not gain much popularity in Korea can be explained by the localization phenomenon.

### 3) Hybridization

Thirdly, the mixing of various cultures can be seen in the mixing of clothing styles of various regions, races and peoples. According to the writings of R. Linton<sup>26</sup>, a 'raceless phenomenon', a phenomenon in which the cultures of various races and peoples have mingled, has been present for a long time. In the fashion world, this raceless phenomenon appeared 30 years ago with the Two Tone Style - a multi-racial, multi-cultural style of the Jamaicans living in England<sup>27</sup>. However, in contrast to the two-tone style that represented a means of opposition for a particular low culture of the Rude-boys, the raceless phenomenon of 1990 was not based on any ideology, but merely came about to inspire creativity and joy. This trend, in the latter part of 1990, became introduced into high fashion. The multi-ethnic style of the latter part of 1990 can be explained as the composition and mixing of various races, peoples and fashion organizations.

## IV. Conclusion

This research looks at the similar trends between contemporary fashion and mass culture. This is then introduced into fashion research to create and enforce a paradigm for the analysis of the contemporary fashion phenomenon. The results are as follows;

1. The concept of contemporary mass culture can be explained by H. Gans' taste culture divided into highbrow culture, middlebrow culture,

<sup>26</sup> R. Linton, "Diffusion", *The Study of Man*, (New York : Appleton-Century-Crofts, inc., 1968), 324-348.

<sup>27</sup> T. Polhemus, *Streetstyle*, (New York : Thames & Hudson Inc., 1997), 58-60.

and lowbrow culture for studying the aspect of the contemporary mass culture in the basis of the documents for the mass culture study.

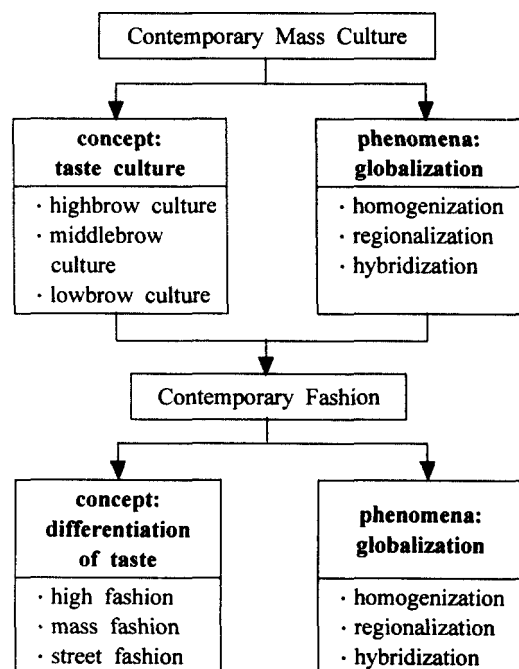
2. The phenomena in the contemporary mass culture can be explained as globalization condensed into homogenization having the same shape in all cultures, regionalization keeping the identity of each of cultures, and hybridization mixing various cultures.
3. Applying the concept of the contemporary mass culture which discriminate subculture by taste to the contemporary fashion, it can be classified into high fashion worn by some fashion leaders, mass fashion chosen by most people, and street fashion costumeed by subculture group independent of public fashion phenomena. At this time, each of fashion groups has equal value, but only tastes for fashion are different.
4. Applying the contemporary mass culture phenomena to the contemporary fashion phenomena, they can be explained as globali-

zation condensed into homogenization having the same shape in all fashion groups and regions, regionalization keeping the identity of each of fashion groups and region, and hybridization mixing various fashion groups and regions.

In the basic of the result of study above, the analyzing frameworks indicated for the study the contemporary fashion phenomena are as follows <Fig. 1>.

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<Fig. 1>

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