Subversion in Style: Clothing, Identity, and Social Change in 1920s Paris

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Abstract
This paper explores the relationship between fashion and identity construction in relation to a social category of woman in 1920's Paris known as the “modern woman” as well as Parisian lesbian subculture of the same era. Concentrating on the behaviours, values and clothing associated with each group, as well as their discursive interaction and interpretation, the paper argues that each group employed clothing to construct identity through which they contested gender and sexual norms and aspired to social change. Fashion designers and artists of the time are considered, as well as theorists of various competing notions of identity.

Clothing is often approached as a means of providing context, rendering visible a culture’s ideology. The garments in fashion at a particular time can indicate a cultural community’s values and interests, yet they are also dynamic elements of cultural discourse inseparable from individual decisions. They are texts, embedded with meaning constructed over time, and can be actively used as a system of codes and signs, and manipulated to create meaning, establish identity, and affect social change. What is of particular interest, and that which will be the focus of this investigation, is how clothing-texts interact with a society’s notion of normative gender and sexuality, and their role in the negotiation of individual or subcultural identity. This investigation will focus on Paris in the 1920s, and particularly two social categories which developed during this time: the modern woman and the lesbian community. The term ‘modern woman’ will be used in this paper to specify women who adopted behaviour, attitudes, and dress which contrasted to prewar designations, suggesting a new understanding of femininity. Despite their distinctness, these two groups were involved in a parallel processes of self-fashioning, and drew from a common discourse which negotiated masculinity and femininity in Parisian society through dress. Their experiences lead to questions of the nature of identity in relation to social change. This paper will ultimately prove that the social categories of modern woman and lesbian in 1920’s Paris employed

2 Many of the women in the latter group would not have identified with the term lesbian, as it was a new term at the time, adopted into the Oxford English Dictionary for the first time in the early twentieth century (Laura Doan and Jane Garrity, eds., Sapphic Modernities: Sexuality, Women and National Culture (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 4) and not widely accepted. Discourse in general about female same-sex desire was also relatively new, but for the sake of argument I will refer to the community of women in Paris associated with same-sex relations as the lesbian community.
clothing to construct identity, through which they contested gender and sexual norms and aspired to social change.

Post-war, Paris experienced a time of drastic change. This change led to both nostalgia for an idyllic pre-war stability on the one hand, and an embrace of the rapid change resulting from a new focus on the individual, the woman, sexuality and consumerism on the other. Liz Conor describes the 1920s as a “spectacular age”, noting that as the target consumers and as performers, women appeared in print media, advertisements, postcards and calendars more in the 1920s than in any previous era. In addition, images of female homosexuals became more prevalent in Parisian popular and visual culture in this era allowing them to, as Tirza True Latimer notes, “imagine and image” themselves for the first time. As the new subject of representation, the woman became a symbol of the changing social ideological system, the subject through which greater social issues were discussed and the target for reactions against the rapid change.

The fashion choices of the modern woman of 1920’s Paris indeed indicated women’s changing role, marking a departure from the long decorative and constricting dresses and corsets which emphasized the ideal curvaceousness of prewar women who focused on their roles as wives and mothers in the domestic interior. As a modern woman herself, fashion designer Coco Chanel developed clothing to accommodate woman’s new active, nontraditional lifestyles which included higher education and increased sexual activity as well as involvement in the workforce, in sports, and in consumer culture. She established a minimalist, smooth, sporty style to provide women with more flexibility, and encouraged behaviour based on the ideal she created. Chanel de-emphasized feminine forms and frills and adopted elements of male fashion—ties, collars, long tailor-cut jackets, and short, bobbed hair under cloche hats. Chanel was thus instrumental in the construction and projection of this new identity for women. In 1923, Vogue magazine acknowledged the significance of her role, announcing, “Chanel expresses the heart and soul of the modern woman.”

The change in Parisian women’s styles at this time suggests an obvious desire to appropriate the masculine image. Film theorists Laura Mulvey and Miriam

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2 Ibid, 6-8.
Hansen identify masculinity as a reference point of agency, stating, “Women in male society, although socialized feminine, have also generally had to identify with the masculine position as the primary location of action and power.” Similarly, Otto Weininger equated a woman’s worth to “the amount of maleness in her.” In relation to these theories, the masculine clothing and hair styles adopted by these women suggested that they too possessed qualities traditionally reserved for men and identified with male experiences. From within a group which was allowed fewer opportunities than men and which was denied a public voice, choosing the new clothing styles which signified the masculine reference point was a claim to agency. French psychiatrist Madeleine Pelletier solidified the claim to masculine agency through clothing by stating, “My costume says to the male: I am your equal [...] If those who wear short hair and starched shirt collars have all the freedom, all the power, well then! I too will wear short hair and a starched shirt collar.” The modern woman’s masculine style therefore challenged essential gender roles and symbolized the development of new ones. Yet, by suggesting that an individual could identify with qualities which fell under either category they also questioned the validity of gender roles themselves.

However, donning masculine clothing also indicated the projection of an ideal or desired identity, as the style was far from liberating, requiring frequent trips to the hairdresser, the maintenance of a slim body shape, and an investment in cosmetics. In addition, although these modern women’s clothing was understood as a sign of emancipation, and although she was associated with active involvement in education, the work force, and politics, women were far from achieving equality with men. Returning from fighting in the war, men reclaimed many of jobs women had taken over, meaning women were left with lower ranking and paying jobs. Although the image of the modern woman was associated with political activism, women could not vote in France in the 1920s. Anne Hollander suggests that the masculine clothing simply reinforced the fact that the women who wore them were not men, solidifying gender boundaries, suggesting that the modern woman’s presentation of self was “in part grounded in fantasy and wish fulfillment.”

Nevertheless, although women may not have achieved equality in the 1920s, clothing did establish a public sphere accessible to women and provided them a personal sense of liberation. According to Mary Louise Roberts, “by wearing these

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12 Ibid, p. 25.
18 Zdatny, Fashion, Work, and Politics in Modern France, 76.
clothes, women could project a fantasy of an ideal, liberated self, one that moved freely in an unconstrained social space."\(^{19}\) However, it is important to note that especially in relation to the acceleration of consumerism and the fashion industry which promoted shopping as a leisure activity for women, clothing was not always intended as a political statement. Many women undoubtedly assumed the new styles for reasons of aesthetic preference, comfort, or the pleasure of looking trendy. However, regardless of whether or not donning the new fashions was politically motivated, it did provoke scandals and strong reactions regularly reported in the popular press. Indeed, it was the interpretations of the new fashions which rendered them political, maintained issues of female identity as a central consideration, and indicated their fundamental position in the discourse of gender role contestation and social change in Paris.\(^{20}\)

Although many embraced the change the new woman represented, there was also a significant movement in support of returning to pre-war gender categories to establish a sense of order, and to validate men's social positioning which had come under threat as their traditional roles were no longer reserved for them. Roberts indicates that "fashion […] operated as a text that conveyed the same cultural malaise or *crise de l'esprit* that Pierre Drieu la Rochelle, Paul Valéry, Romaine Rolland, and other prominent writers made famous after the war."\(^{21}\) Medical professionals drew a relationship between the fashions and the falling birthrate, indicating that the shorter skirts made women vulnerable to winds which would harm their reproductive organs,\(^{22}\) and a Catholic pamphlet in 1920 called "*La mode est coupable*" warned: "your children will suffer because of you and the future generation, product of an age of pleasure, will not know to conserve what our soldiers have defended."\(^{23}\) Thus, the new style was interpreted as a threat which challenged fundamental values and assumptions not only on the personal but also national level.

These reactions also applied to the clothing worn by the lesbian community. Like the modern woman, the lesbian community in Paris also engaged in a process of self-fashioning, assuming nontraditional clothing and negotiating individual and subcultural identity as well as social change. However, the project in which the Parisian lesbian subculture engaged went beyond that of the modern woman, as they associated themselves with specific groups and meanings, and ultimately challenged not only gender norms, but also normative sexual practice and the system of categorization as a whole.

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\(^{19}\) Roberts, "Samson and Delilah Revisited," 667.

\(^{20}\) Ibid, 684.

\(^{21}\) Ibid, 673.

\(^{22}\) Ibid, 671.

\(^{23}\) Ibid.
Although Parisian lesbians were known to wear nontraditional and masculine clothing, the fashions of the modern woman in the 1920s introduced new standards of what was acceptable for women to wear, influencing the way lesbians were perceived and judged. Art historian Joe Lucchesi explores the interaction between the two groups, suggesting that the accepted masculinized styles of the modern woman meant that lesbians’ style was less shocking or different, granting them a degree of freedom from social consequences to express their sexuality. Lucchesi argues that the Parisian lesbians “masqueraded” as modern women, yet many went beyond this, establishing their difference from the modern woman by donning not the current styles but masculine clothing from different time periods. These clothing choices identified them as different from mainstream culture, despite the fact that masculine clothing for women was in style.

American expatriate painter Romaine Brooks was known to experiment with both female and male dress before the masculinized style of the modern woman was fully accepted. However, she later differentiated herself from the image of the modern woman by donning extreme versions of male dress including old fashioned suits and flowing evening jackets, in contrast to Chanel’s straight-lined jersey suits. Her clothing choices symbolically set her outside of the dominant narrative of stylistic and societal progression, and indeed, Natalie Barney wrote that she “belongs to no time, no country, no milieu.” In her 1923 self-portrait (Figure 1), Brooks constructs an identity through numerous conflicting sartorial codes including a top hat, a white collared shirt, a black jacket buttoned left to right in the masculine style, a red lapel ribbon from the Legion of Honour, lipstick and gloves. Her lipstick, hat and jacket suggest the current fashions of the modern woman, yet the sum of her style is more masculine than feminine. Nonetheless, Brooks’ clothing is thirty years out of style, referring not to the current masculine heterosexual style, but to the dandy aesthetic of the 1890s. Thus, rather than placing herself in the ‘male’ category, Brooks rejects both current masculinity and femininity, associating herself and the Parisian lesbians within a genealogy that included Charles Baudelaire, James Abbott McNeill Whistler, and Oscar Wilde, whom she called fellow lapides (outcasts), and which signified refinement, decadence, alternative masculinity, and later, alternative sexuality. The dandy was also associated with aristocratic privilege, and comparing herself to this figure, as well as depicting her Legion of Honour award allowed Brooks to make a statement about her social position. Linking

24 Lucchesi, “‘The Dandy in Me,’” 173.
25 Ibid.
27 Elliott, “Performing the Picture or Painting the Other,” 74.
28 Ibid., 14.
29 Lucchesi, “‘The Dandy in Me,’” 169.
the Parisian lesbians to an established and recognized group solidified and legitimized their existence and position outside the narrative of dominant society. Indeed, this act questioned the legitimacy of the dominant social and political narratives.

Critics have explained Brooks’ appropriation of the dandy style by the lack of visual discourse of female homosexuality, and indeed, by the 1920s lesbianism was rarely directly named in the popular press and sexologists were only beginning to attempt to understand, explain, and categorize it. However, a sartorial system, or dress code, did exist in the Parisian lesbian community, unrecognizable by the dominant culture, allowing lesbians to discreetly identify themselves to one another. Although there were meeting places for male homosexuals, particularly the upper galleries of theatres and Paris’s Garnier Opéra, very few existed for lesbians, and thus, sartorial codes were the most important method of expressing sexual identity to other like-minded individuals. This sartorial system did include elements of the dandy style, such as decadent, highly tailored suits and monocles; however, it was not limited to this. Brooks’ hat, gloves and jacket—part of a riding habit called a hacking jacket—suggest an equestrian costume, which references the virile female equestrian or Greek warrior Amazon, a fable prevalent within the lesbian community. Lesbian visual discourse also developed during World War I, when many female artists experimented with the “pseudo-male” look through starched collars and tailored clothes. By employing the lesbian visual communication system in her self-portrait, Brooks not only made a statement about her sexual identity, but also contributed to the discourse and visibility of female homosexuality, gradually influencing dominant Parisian culture.

Like that of the modern woman, the clothing depicted in Brooks’ self-portrait projects an ideal identity, the image of the individual she aspired to be. Both were involved in a process of self-fashioning, using clothing to construct an image based on a desired identity, and then attempting to embody that projected by the image. However, unlike the modern woman, Brooks shifted between masculine and feminine clothing, destabilizing the idea of a monolithic identity, and suggesting that identity is, rather, a work of art, as Elizabeth Wilson posits. In photographs and portraits of Brooks as a young woman, the artist wears feminine attire, but in a 1924 photograph captioned “Romaine Brooks modeling her fashions,” she embodies the dandy. In this picture, she is looking away wearing a top hat and kerchief with her manicured hands fingering her lapel on which is a white carnation. The photographs indicate Brooks’ choice to project different statements about her identity on different occasion.

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32 Ibid, 60. Note: The lesbian sartorial discourse extended to identifying the few lesbian meeting places, including a night club in Paris called ‘The Monocle’ (Latimer, Women Together/Women Apart, 23).
34 Latimer, Women Together/Women Apart, 23.
occasions. Her autobiography likewise indicates her process of forming an identity, as she alters details about herself including her age and the existence of her sister. In a letter to Barney, Brooks wrote, “they like the dandy in me and are in no way interested in my inner-self,” suggesting an identity inclusive of multiple forms of self, as well as a separation between her self and the masculine role she performed. This implication of Brooks’ performativity contradicts not only traditional notions of identity as destiny, in which an individual’s identity is predetermined according to one’s biology, but also the notion of identity as site of resistance. According to this notion of identity, members of a minority group define themselves in opposition to a larger society. This model may prove restrictive to minority group members as it requires them to conform to an identity defined by the group. In the case of Brooks, rather than conforming to the dominant Parisian lesbian identity, she oscillated between identities and roles, performing identity based on the situation.

This interpretation of Brooks’ identity construction and communication is related to the concept of the masquerade discussed by psychoanalyst Joan Rivière in 1929. In her essay “Womanliness as a Masquerade,” Rivière argues that “womanliness [can] be assumed and worn as a mask,” explaining that professional women may overemphasize their femininity when addressing male colleagues in order to avoid anxiety and prevent men from feeling threatened. This implies that the notion of gender is a constructed role to be enacted, is separate from the actor, and that the actor’s true identity is filtered through an ideology of normative gender and sexuality. It also indicates the idea that acting in a way that does not conform to one’s gender role will be followed by consequences, both from others and from oneself. Crucial to this theory is the notion of a stable identity underneath the mask. Contributing to the discourse of gender and identity, Michel Foucault notes that as a cultural construct, sex conceals and artificially unifies an individual’s multiple unrelated sensations, pleasures and desires under specific, oppositional categories, and thus dictates one’s identity and establishes a system of order. Oscillating between male and female dress and referencing multiple discourses of sartorial meaning in her self-portrait, Brooks ultimately renders visible this multiplicity of sensations and contests her prescribed role. She rejects the social system of categorizing people according to gender or sexuality, yet by acting and dressing in a certain way from which she may deviate depending on the situation, she maintaining the notion of a stable actor beneath the mask.

36 Wilson, Adorned in Dreams, 62.
37 Elliott and Wallace, Women Artists and Writers, 41.
40 Judith Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (New York: Routledge, 1990), 74.
41 In this case, the woman’s anxiety is evidence of internalized social structures and fear of social criticism, which would constitute consequences from oneself of deviating from normative gender and sexual roles.
42 Butler, Gender Trouble, 128.
The notion of performativity is also explored by Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore, who similarly created portraits through sartorial codes. Often associated with the Parisian lesbian community, the works of these two artists not only challenged gender and sexual norms, but threatened the whole system of categorization by refusing to take part in group identification in general, thus subverting the notion of a singular, unchanging self. The portraits they created of Cahun depict her in a range of personas, from a feminine boxer to an 1890s dandy. The roles Cahun inhabits do not describe her identity, but through the exaggeration of their nature and her use of the studio as a background, she instead draws attention to the fact that these roles are constructed.43

In an untitled portrait of Cahun as a 1890s dandy, Cahun stands against a flat white background covered with a black curtain, signifying a staged portrait or performance. She stares out blankly at the viewer, with one hand on her hip, playing the role the dandy is most known for: an observer. Her costume is exaggerated—she wears a black suit over a white scarf, with a white handkerchief in her breast-pocket, and her head is shaved. The background, Cahun’s shaved head, and her too-large suit dramaticize the photograph and indicate that it was staged to depict Cahun performing a role. The viewer can access only Cahun’s performance, and may in fact, after considering the whole collection of portraits, begin to doubt the existence of a stable identity beyond her role. In Aveux non avenues, Cahun writes, “Masculine? Feminine? That depends on the occasion. Neuter is the only gender that invariably suits me. If it existed in our language one would not observe this oscillation in my thinking.”44 Cahun’s statement indicates her refusal to be categorized by the traditional methods of gender identification, yet her portraits go beyond this. They indicate a refusal of any categorization at all: not by sex, class, or profession. It is as if these too depend on the occasion.

Cahun’s verbal and visual statements contrast with those of Brooks and the modern woman, reflecting conflicting notions of identity. The modern woman adopted elements of masculine style to make her appearance more masculine, working under the assumption of a singular, unchanging sense of self. Brooks constructed her identity through sartorial signs that aligned herself with the dandy and mannish lesbian, and by writing about an “inner-self,” suggests the presence of a fixed self underlying her performance. Cahun, on the other hand, denies any such essence, replacing this notion with one of subjective identity and identity as choice. Cahun’s perspective contrasts with Rivière’s notion of the masquerade, as for Cahun, there is no identifiable actor behind the mask, but identity is, rather, a collection of acts tailored to each given situation, a concept which forms the basis of performance studies. Cahun and Moore did not participate in the Parisian lesbian community to the extent that Brooks did, refusing to identify themselves permanently with any

category, and allowing them freedom to choose to identify with any group at a given time. The portraits indicate Cahun's ultimate control over who she appears to be.

The relationship between clothing and expression explored by Brooks, Cahun and Moore indicates the centrality of dress in the social discourse of 1920s Paris, as it became a symbol of social change and an arena in which issues of acceptable gender roles and sexuality were contested. For the women discussed in this investigation, clothing not only rendered visible their attitudes and beliefs, but was actively used as a means of communication, a critique of existing ideological systems, and the promotion of social change. While the modern woman introduced masculine codes into women's fashions, Brooks combined sartorial codes to confuse the categories of masculinity and femininity, and Cahun and Moore refused the whole system of gender and sexual roles all together by exaggerating clothing to indicate performativity and the constructedness of roles, they independently worked within a discourse that aspired to an alternative social system. Whether or not these women succeeded in establishing change is beyond the scope of this investigation; however, the extent and severity of the reactions to their actions, as well the rise in scholarship around these women indicate a reception of their statements and the development of dialogue in response. Indeed, reconsidering the actions of the modern woman and Parisian lesbians of the 1920's functions to reinforce the importance of these actions, as part of a project of social change affecting not only French women but also a broad contemporary audience.
Works Cited


