

Fashioning the Figure of French Creativity: A Historical Perspective on the Political Function of French Fashion Discourse

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Introduction

In May 2006, an article entitled 'Label France' appeared in the French edition of *Elle*. Its opening narrative suggests a nation in crisis but with the hope of re-birth through the cultures of art, food and fashion. This foregrounding of fashion as a cornerstone of national identity, arguably, relates as much to its historical role as to *Elle*'s status as a woman's magazine. Indeed, historically, fashion discourse has formed a key rhetorical element in the creation of French national identity.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, fashion became big business for France, both domestically and in terms of exports. Fashion's confluence with the wider changes in society - democratization, capitalism, consumerism and gender politics, for example - meant that fashion represented French society in microcosm. The emerging discourse of women's magazines, in particular, became a component in the creation of French identity, as reflected in the trope of 'notre génie industriel' common to all forms of fashion discourse. However, the imbrication of ideology and the industry meant that fashion found itself at the nexus of debates on economics, politics and gender that formed the new discourses of power, a vector of concerns about the stability of modern French society. Arguably, the discourse of fashion became a Foucauldian 'discours problématique'ⁱ not only for the industry itself, but also for the country as a whole.

During the First World War and after the Second, fashion and its discourse, particularly that surrounding Haute Couture, continued to define the cultural identity of the nation both at home and abroad. In *Système de la mode*, Roland Barthes (1967) notes the ideological inflection and the privileging of French High Culture in the discourse of *Elle* of the late 1960s – although Barthes does not apply these paradigms to the construction of a national self.

But is this historical symbiosis between French identity and the discourse of fashion still intact, especially given that both are facing an identity crisis amidst globalization? Furthermore if, as the editorial cited at the beginning of this article suggests, fashion is still a key signifier in the rhetoric of nationhood, is the current identity constructed in and through the discourse of fashion the same as in earlier periods?

It is the aim of this paper to provide a brief historical overview of the relationship between fashion rhetoric and constructions of national identity as a lens through which to analyse these questions. The primary focus of the article will be a close textual reading of key historical and current

fashion periodicals, particularly *Le Moniteur de la mode* (1843–1913), *La Mode illustrée* (1860-1937), *Elle* (1945-) and *Vogue* (1920-). Reference will be also be made to *Le Monde* in the latter part of the article because fashion has, since the 1980s, become a more prominent feature of its news, especially during the Paris shows and, because it is less dependent on advertising revenue from fashion brands, *Le Monde* comments more openly than the magazine portfolio on the crisis of identity that occurred in the late 1990s. (See the references for a full list of primary sources used). The method I shall use to read the discourse will be broadly derived from Barthes' *Système de la mode* (1967) and will focus particularly on the rhetoric or tropes that the discourse uses to describe French fashion. I am not, however, proposing to conduct an exhaustive survey of the organisation of the discourse as Barthes has done; rather I shall use some of the definitions that Barthes' analysis has engendered to expose the connotative level of the editorial comment. I shall also discuss imagery, where appropriate, to explore and expose the connotative significance of the text.

The article will suggest that fashion still plays a significant role in the production of French identity but that while certain key historical tropes relating to creativity continue to be foregrounded, the figure of France created by the discourse is now framed from a global rather than from a domestic perspective.

An Ideological Discourse

The fortunes of the fashion press, the fashion industry and the French nation have been linked since the seventeenth century when the court of the Sun King was the epicentre of all that was fashionable, culturally and sartorially in the Western world. The first vehicles of the fashion media were the dolls sent by the shops on Rue St Honoré to the courts of Europe to promote the wares of the burgeoning guilds of tailors and embroiderers (Richoux-Bérard and Bonnet, 2004).

The revolution saw the repeal of the sumptuary laws of the *Ancien Régime*, which had prohibited the wearing of certain types of clothing, such as velvet, from all but the aristocracy,ⁱⁱ and thus created the theoretical opportunity for a democratic fashion industry and press. In the nineteenth century, the rapid growth of the textile industry, the development of ready-to-wear clothing and the advent of the department store, together with a growth in personal wealth and the expansion of the railways, meant that fashion entered bourgeois culture.ⁱⁱⁱ By 1850, France was Europe's biggest textile producer and by 1860, the foremost industrial power in Europe due to clothing and its ancillary industries.^{iv} Major contributors to this business were the *magasins de nouveautés*: Le Bon Marché and Printemps were both opened during the Second Empire and by 1875, Le Bon Marché had exports of 13 million francs (*L'Économiste français*, 29 January 1876, in Mermet (1876: 710).

It was women's fashion in particular which became the leitmotif of the propaganda of the Great Exhibitions, particularly those of 1867 and 1878. In 1867, journalist Auguste Dusautoy writes in his report on the Great Exhibition, 'Le développement de la confection féminine mérite un classement hors ligne' and that 'Le jury a déclaré qu'aucun pays ne pouvait venir en concurrence avec la confection française; les autres nations n'ont pas exposé de confections pour femmes' (Dusautoy, 1867: 31).

Fashion became the sole delineator, the privileged signifier of France's industrial superiority and indeed national superiority in all forms of fashion discourse. As one magazine reports, 'Il n'y aura bientôt plus qu'un costume à l'Occident, au Sud et au Nord c'est le nôtre. Voilà ce qui devient tous les jours de plus en plus incontestable' (*Fashion Théorie* February 1863, in Perrot (1981: 110) and the *Journal des tailleurs* extols the influence of French fashion: 'On a pu comparer entre les costumes de tous les pays, et constater une fois de plus l'influence de nos modes parisiennes' (*Journal des tailleurs* July 1855).

During the nineteenth century the specialist press solidified its influence on the culture and discourse of fashion. In 1840 there were twenty titles, by 1900 there were more than two hundred. The French press was the Western model for the fashion magazine and was also the most influential due to the desirability of French women's fashion. A large export market for these women's journals, as well as for the clothes themselves, developed: *Le Moniteur de la mode* had eight foreign editions, including London, New York and St Petersburg, for example. Much of this success was due to the advertising support of the department stores, not only through small-scale advertisements or *annonces*, but also their sponsorship of expensive fashion plates in exchange for editorial mention, or what today is known as advertorial.

However, equally significant was the implicit support that the fashion media received from Napoleon III: immunity from the draconian new press laws of February 1852, for example. Napoleon III had a vested interest in promoting the business of fashion given that his political stability was linked to the industry: more than 761,000 potentially disruptive workers were employed in the clothing industry by 1850. The Empress Eugénie adopted 'toilettes politiques', including the wearing of Lyons silks and domestically manufactured shawls. These 'toilettes' were promoted in the fashion media, in order to provide impetus and support to the nation's artisans and manufacturers.

Fashion was also at the forefront of the industrial and cultural revolution (democratization, capitalism, consumerism) taking place in the country and, as such, represented French society in microcosm. It was the most tangible signifier of the bourgeois ideology of 'le bien-être matériel'. It became, in Barthesian terms, the *forme* for a multiplicity of myths through which the government articulated and justified its power base.^v However, it also became the locus of debates from those critical of the direction that France was taking such as the Right, the aristocracy and, increasingly, the Catholic Church and fashion offered a *forme* for undermining the very power bases it

had been used to endorse, namely democracy, industrialisation, consumerism and Napoleon's regime itself.^{vi}

In addition to the transposition of the aristocratic symbolism of power and prestige onto French technology, clothing and the nation, fashion also became the privileged signifier of French creativity, 'La France artistique':

Les étoffes sont admirables, les confections, toutes les fantaisies à l'ordre du jour, les types gracieux sont créés d'une manière artistique et vont porter chez les élégantes de tous les pays la gloire de l'industrie parisienne. (*Le Moniteur de la mode*, May 1866: 65).

The wider artistic community reinforced this synonymy between fashion and Art by embracing fashion as the symbol of Modernity.^{vii} For expressionist painters such as Manet, fashion offered a shorthand template for conveying contemporary reality and Marie Simon argues that *Déjeuner sur l'Herbe* was copied directly from the iconography of the fashion *gravure* (Simon, 1995: 9). Writers such as Flaubert (who wrote for *Les Modes parisiennes*), Gautier and, later, Colette wrote about fashion and in 1874, the poet Mallarmé founded a fashion magazine, *La Dernière Mode*.

Paris and other French haunts (including the Bois de Boulogne and Longchamps) were promoted in the press as the acme of fashionable culture and a plethora of new fashion periodicals appeared with Paris and Parisienne in their titles, such as *La Toilette de Paris*, *Les Modes parisiennes*, *Longchamps et Paris élégant* and *La Parisienne*. The figure of *La Parisienne* became the commodified expression of fashionable femininity and 'parisien' was foregrounded in the discourse as the key variant of desirability:

Attendu la solennité de Longchamps, et considérant que la mode et le luxe donnent à une nation une prospérité toute nouvelle, en alimentant l'industrie et le commerce *Le Moniteur de la mode* décrète: Seulement les Parisiennes auront des yeux d'Orientale, des yeux doux et brillants à la fois. (*Le Moniteur de la mode*, April 1852: 1-3).

French women and French craftsmanship were synthesized and fetishized in the discourse in rhetorical tropes of commodified luxury that centered on the variants: 'riche', 'élégant' and 'luxe'. As one woman writes in response to critics of luxury fashions and feminine consumption, 'La proscription du luxe! Mais c'est le suicide de la France, et non seulement de la France économique, mais aussi de la France artistique' (Anon, 1865: 26). It was this artistic element of fashion that was to become a key signifier in French national identity in the twentieth century.

French Patriotism and Creativity

In 1912 seven Parisian designers, including Poiret and Worth, sponsored a new fashion magazine *La Gazette du Bon Ton* that united artists and

couturiers and was particularly aimed at the growing American market. *La Gazette du Bon Ton* not only featured traditional fashion plates showing the latest couture models but also plates of clothing created by the artists themselves. The symbolic value of Couture as Art, rather than fashion, was born: 'Les peintres collaborent avec les couturiers. La parure de la femme est un plaisir de l'œil qu'on ne juge pas inférieur aux autres arts. [...] *La Gazette du Bon Ton* sera l'expression de cet art' (November 1912: 3).

During the First World War the French government viewed the export of these couture garments as essential to the war effort. Although there were fewer issues, French fashion magazines continued to publish during the war and there were even some new publications launched, such as *Le Style parisien* (July 1915 - February 1916) and *Les Éléances parisiennes* (1916 - 1924), that were used specifically to promote French couture at home and abroad. The magazines' rhetoric was inflected with patriotism: in 1917, *Fémina* introduced a column entitled 'La mode pendant la guerre' and in June 1916 *Les Éléances parisiennes* ran a two page editorial entitled 'Ce que devrait faire la Mode Parisienne [sic]' in which it railed against 'le fléau de la copie', particularly German lace, but also foregrounded the economic importance of the industry:

La Mode parisienne [sic], malgré sa supériorité reconnue de tous, ne peut pas rester en dehors de la lutte économique, car elle ne représente pas simplement nos charmants privilèges, mais encore un mouvement d'affaires extrêmement important. Il est non seulement flatteur mais extrêmement profitable d'être le centre des élégances du monde. (*Les Éléances parisiennes*, June 1916: 27).

Despite relatively recent attempts by the American clothing industry to wrest control from France, the support of Paris fashion became, according to Valerie Steele, tantamount to the support of Western civilisation (Steele, 1998: 238). There was a special exhibition by Parisian Couture Houses in San Francisco in 1915. This exhibition was commemorated with a souvenir issue of *La Gazette du Bon Ton* entitled 'The 1915 Mode as Shown by Paris' and was published in partnership with *Condé Nast* in America and France. The rhetoric reinforced the link between fashion and the French war effort in phrases such as 'l'élégance guerrière' and 'La Mode Française doit rester Française'. Furthermore, competitive nations were named as the 'Other' in matters of taste, reasserting the superiority of a French 'sens d'élégance' in the face of emerging fashion industries. Designers were urged to desist from making items 'au goût de M.X., le gros commissaire d'outre-Atlantique, ou de M.Y., l'important acheteur des Balkans' (*Les Éléances parisiennes*, June 1917: 27).

Following the war, the imbrication of Fashion and Art developed into a paradigm of Couture as High Art and more importantly, French High Culture. This cultural model was produced through textual and iconographic links with surrealism, as well as the emergence of fashion photography and the illustrations of those such as Erté as an art form. In 1922 *La Gazette du Bon Ton* highlighted the cultural influence of French fashion in its rhetoric:

'Parlerons-nous de son influence et de la propagande permanente qu'elle fait à notre culture française à l'étranger.' (March 1922: 22). Even during the First World War, the discourse invoked signifiers from the realm of High Culture to symbolise the superiority not only of the garment but the cultural heritage of the nation. In an editorial on the latest fashions in 1916, *Les Éléances parisiennes* asserted: 'la douillette, dont rêvait certes, déjà, Mme Bovary, nous revient en taffetas puces à grosses manches' (June 1916: 25).

In a symbolic gesture that reflects the synonymy between France's national identity and *La Mode*, the French fashion press was censored between 1940 and 1945 and both *Vogue* and *Fémina* ceased publication. When the Germans attempted to move the couture industry to Berlin, Lucien Lelong, president of the Chambre Syndicale de Couture, declared to the occupiers: 'Vous pouvez tout nous imposer par la force, mais la couture française ne se transfère ni en bloc ni dans ses éléments. Elle est à Paris, ou elle n'est pas' (Demomex, 2007: 84). Paris remained the home of Couture.

Haute Couture formed a central platform for the rebuilding of France and French national identity after the Second World War. In 1948, Lelong organised a travelling puppet show of 200 couture-clad dolls called 'Le Théâtre de la Mode' and French *Vogue* devoted 23 pages of its February issue to the designs. The power and prestige of France together with the creativity of the nation were transferred in the discourse from the sector of Haute Couture to the couturiers themselves, especially Christian Dior: *Elle* referred to 'Les coups de théâtre de Christian Dior dont la collection bouleverse la mode du monde entier' (*Elle*, 25 September 1945: 5). The tropes of 'bon goût' and, more particularly, 'distinction' linked French fashion and, as a corollary, the French nation to superior culture and taste.

However, increasingly, the French fashion journals and newspapers no longer controlled the discourse. The expansion of the American press and the lucrative American market meant that it was often American journalists whose rhetoric dictated perceptions of the Couture shows. Carmel Snow, editor of *Harper's Bazaar*, remarked to a *Time Magazine* journalist in August 1947 that 'the Editors must recognise fashions while they are still a thing of the future. The dressmakers create them, but without these magazines, the fashions would never be established or accepted' (Wilcox, 2007, p.21). Furthermore, the influence of Hollywood was felt amongst consumers: in 1937, newly launched *Marie Claire* ran a double page spread on 'L'influence de l'écran sur la mode'. French *Vogue* countered in support of the domestic industry with 'Hollywood habille un film, Paris habille la femme' (Demomex, 2007:165).

Commercialism and High Culture

By the end of the 1960s, French fashion discourse had become increasingly reified around the signifiers of High Culture and Craft. Barthes writes in *Système de la mode* that the signifying value of fashion centres on three social paradigms. The most important, he argues, is culture, the second is the fairy tale and the third paradigm is the notion of detail, or what I have

previously described as the craftsmanship of French fashion (Barthes, 1967: 243-6).

Barthes identifies Art as the principal model of culture, but solely a closed and recognisable type: 'L'Art enfin (peinture, sculpture, littérature, cinéma) le plus riche des thèmes inspireurs, marqué dans la rhétorique de Mode par un éclectisme total, pourvu que les références soient connues (la nouvelle ligne Tanagra, les déshabillés Watteau, les couleurs Picasso)' (Barthes 1967: 244). Whilst Barthes himself does not analyze the discourse within the context of French national identity, the examples he cites both here and elsewhere suggest a limited field of works and artists that are emblematic of French creativity. Within the closed field of cultural reference, French fashion and Haute Couture, in particular, are configured as the superior cultural model.^{viii} Moreover, I would contend that the detail of French fashion continues to signify national creativity and rarity through its fetishization of the notion of work and craft: 'cinquante heures de patient travail' (*Elle*, 31 December 1969: 36).

However, the discourse and the creativity of the French nation, for which fashion functioned as a sign, were becoming increasingly reified within an introspective and bourgeois cultural paradigm. Barthes points out that 'c'est le stéréotype qui fonde l'équilibre de la rhétorique de la mode' (Barthes, 1967: 250). This reification is reflected in a comparison between two covers of French *Vogue* from 1969 and from 1988 that are graphically virtually identical - both feature a photograph of a prominent French actress (Catherine Deneuve and Isabelle Adjani respectively), shot in the same manner, with the same type-face and little evidence of the shifts in culture, in particular the growth of 'pop culture' nor, indeed, the social and political status of women, that have taken place in the intervening decades.

By the middle of the 1990s, French fashion discourse found itself caught between the demands of globalization and marketing, 'les rois du marketing et de l'image qui triomphent depuis le début des années 90' (*Le Monde*, 12 March 1996) and its own rarefied praxis of High Culture, 'La haute couture c'est un rituel, comme l'Opéra. Elle fait partie de la grande messe de la beauté, du luxe, du raffinement' (*Le Monde*, 18 January 1996).

Agnès Rocamora notes that in *Le Monde*: 'Commerce and art are depicted as two contradictory principles, and high fashion as high art becomes a victim of this contradiction' (Rocamora, 2001: 135). Rocamora contrasts this dichotomy with the world of pop culture in Britain where 'the market is a motor of the field, a necessary and acknowledged component of high fashion' (Rocamora, 2001: 136).

In the late 1990s, the discourse continued to fetishize the craft of French fashion, as illustrated in these two quotations from *Le Monde*: 'Chez Yves St Laurent, le travail sur un vêtement équivaut à un acte de haute chirurgie avec ce ruban de gros-grain que les ouvrières de l'avenue Marceau utilisent pour orner un tailleur'; 'Chez le brodeur Lesage, mille deux cent quatre-vingt heures ont été nécessaires pour ce fourreau d'or de Chanel.' (*Le Monde*, 18 and 28 January 1996). It also increasingly configured French

fashion as the cognitive model or 'original' for 'élégance', particularly in the face of increased competition from Italy and America. Designers such as Calvin Klein or Donna Karan produce 'une nouvelle « élégance », noblesse de matières, simplicité des formes, qui sont souvent les parodies assez efficaces et « light » d'une histoire déjà écrite dans les années 60-70' (*Le Monde*, 21 January 1996). The 'exception culturelle' of French creativity becomes a counter-discourse to the praxis of international taste and the spirit of Coco Chanel is invoked to signify this heritage: 'Bravant les limites du bon goût international italo-américain Paris revendique sa différence, à travers des collections d'auteur qui restituent le parfum de la dame en noir, entre nostalgie couture et modernité des lignes' (*Le Monde*, 24 March 1996).

Pierre Bourdieu has noted that the opposition between the commercial and the non-commercial is central to the French vision of what constitutes art (Bourdieu 1980: 10). As a result of this vision, French fashion found itself out of step with the times, as Pierre Bergé remarked in 2002 on the retirement of Yves St Laurent: 'La création et le marketing ne font pas bon ménage. Cette époque n'est plus la nôtre.' (*Le Monde*, 7 January 2002). This dissonance with contemporary praxis created a cultural diaspora, a crisis of identity for French fashion and the nation. According to *Le Monde*, the designers themselves were suffering a 'crise d'identité' and 'lassitude' and, as a result, French fashion itself had become stultified and 'fonctionne en circuit fermé' (12 March 1996).

Paris became a bystander in the fashion world and La Parisienne 'semble avoir pris dix ans: trop de paillettes, trop d'épaulettes, de talons et de boutons dorés' (12 March 1996). Even French *Vogue* configures the Paris of the late 1990s as, 'ville musée, un rien au creux de la vague fashion' (September 2007: 425). However, the dissolution of French fashion was imbricated by the discourse with a more general decline of France culturally, economically and politically:

Mais ce déclin culturel est indissociable de la dégradation économique de tout un secteur, privé de tout ce qui faisait sa force: le savoir-faire, l'amour du beau et de la qualité, qui sont aujourd'hui l'apanage des Italiens. [...] Sur fond de crise morale dont l'apparence est une révélatrice, le conformisme pourrait bien isoler encore la France de sa légende cosmopolite (*Le Monde*, 12 March 1996).

A Global Discourse

The editorial 'Label France' cited at the beginning of this article suggests that France and French identity are still in crisis: 'franchement, en France, il n'y a pas de quoi être fier.' After all, globalisation has continued apace since the 1990s: at the September ready-to-wear shows in 2008 there were 1,615 journalists from 50 countries and France faces increasing competition in both clothing and the fashion media. In publishing terms, the French now produce fewer fashion journals than the Americans and Italians. This

competition, together with the advent of the internet and fashion blogs, such as *Planet Fashion*, have further undermined French control of the discourse and their ability to construct perceptions of fashion and, by extension, to create fashion as a positive facet of the French national self.

However, as noted at the outset, the discourse perceives fashion as a key paradigm in the rebirth of France and its culture: 'Il y a dix ans, impératrices de la presse américaine et acheteurs des grands magasins US boudaient Paris. C'est du passé' and *Elle's* optimistic belief in a new fashion renaissance that preceded the 2007 presidential election would seem to have continued in its aftermath. The trope of French creativity is still foregrounded in the discourse. Indeed, Paris has 'redevendue l'épicentre de la création' (*Elle*, 29 May 2006: 94) and the fashion store Colette has become 'le spot essentiel de la hype parisienne' (*Vogue*, March 2008: 241-2).

The quality of French design and workmanship, 'le travail d'exception de sept ateliers français historiquement liés à la haute couture' (*Le Monde*, 11 December 2007) continues to be fetishized, particularly in relation to designer Haute Couture and Ready-to-Wear. This workmanship is contrasted with the 'H&Misation and Zaratisme' of France's cut-price competitors: 'La grande diffusion ne sait pas copier le savoir-faire' (*Elle*, 3 September 2007: 164).

However, Haute Couture itself, rather than High Culture, has become the new cognitive model and 'original' the new paradigm of French creativity and superiority. In his essay 'Haute Couture et Haute Culture' Pierre Bourdieu argues that this notion of the 'original' is essential to both those against change, 'les détenteurs de la légitimité', and those who want to enter or perhaps, in the case of the French, re-enter the field and 'lance[r] des anathèmes mais au nom d'une définition plus pure, plus authentique de ce nom au quoi les dominants dominent' (Bourdieu, 1980: 199). It would appear that since the despair of the late 1990s when the discourse defensively attempted to discredit the competitors' wares as parodies, there has been a shift towards a more assertive and, arguably, subversive counter-discourse that defines French fashion and with it, French creativity as more authentic, more pure than that of its competitors. When discussing the new collection of British designer Hussein Chalayan, for example, *Elle* configures it within the parameters of a French Haute Couture original: 'Allant jusqu'à rappeler les interprétations de femmes fatales, signées Thierry Mugler' (*Elle*, 6 September 2008: 162). Increasing editorial space is devoted to the legacy of the great French designers as signifiers of French creativity and style. *Vogue* describes the Chanel vest as 'cette icône de style classée au patrimoine du CHIC [sic] à la française' (*Vogue*, September 2008: 265).

One designer, in particular, is emblematic of the 'authentic' creative genius: Yves St Laurent, who since his death has become the privileged *forme* for French fashion mythology. According to *Le Monde*, the latest collections, 'raconte[nt] l'histoire d'un monde en mouvement qu'Yves St Laurent avait pressenti en 1976' (*Le Monde*, 22 February 2007). In an article on emerging

international talent, *Elle* argues, 'Mais ce n'est pas avant tout l'esprit de Saint Laurent qui flotte sur cette saison' (*Elle*, 3 September 2007:164). St Laurent has become the vehicle for the expression of French culture : 'Quiconque a vu une collection [d'Yves St Laurent] c'est tout un univers qui s'exprime, c'est toute une culture faite de musique, de littérature, de cinéma' (*Le Monde*, 7 July 2008). Indeed, he has become the symbol of the creative genius of the French nation, a figure so significant in defining French artistry that even politicians invoke him as a signifier of French creativity: 'Un artiste de génie qui a tant contribué au rayonnement de la France' (Prime Minister François Fillon, quoted in *Le Monde*, 7 July 2008). The latest reports on the Parisian fashion shows in February of this year further emphasise this purity in terms of 'austérité' and 'sans bling' which, while a reflection of the troubled economic times, also serve to reinforce the authenticity of French fashion.

Allied to this authenticity, taste is once again used to signify French superiority: 'On ne peut pas développer le bon goût à grande échelle' (*Elle*, 10 September 2007: 165) and the alterity of the 'Other': 'le mauvais goût des nouveaux riches de Kiev et de Mouscou' (*Le Monde*, 24 February 2008). Carla Bruni, Italian by birth, has been appropriated by the industry and, arguably, the nation (as France's 'First Lady'), to wear and promote French fashion. She is represented in the discourse, in a manner redolent of Empress Eugénie (born in Spain), as the emblem of French taste and 'chic', as for example : 'La première dame de France n'a pas manqué, à chaque sortie officielle, ces derniers mois, de faire pour Dior le plus chic des publicités planétaires' (*Le Monde*, 7 July 2008).

However, there is a new recognition in the discourse that fashion is a global business and Paris is now configured as the creative hub of this international industry: 'Paris n'est pas régional mais international. [...] Paris est plus que jamais l'endroit où peuvent s'exercer des expressions artistiques très différentes et très regardées' (*Le Monde*, 30 September 2008). Indeed Paris has, once more, a symbolic value in the rhetoric of fashion; as reflected in the numerous French brands that choose to emphasise their Parisian heritage in their clothing labels and advertising – Bocage: Paris, for example – and the discourse itself: 'Pour une allure made in Paris' (*Vogue*, September, 2008: 141).

More significantly, perhaps, there has been a shift from a vision of the globe in a French context to France in a global context. *Elle* observes that in the Paris collections 'Ghesquière et Slimane sont quasi les seuls régionaux de l'étape' (10 November, 2008). The discourse is framed from outside rather than inside French culture, as indicated by the privileging of anglicisms such as 'Frenchy' and Paris has become a 'une capitale du shopping' (*Elle*, 25 May 2008: 237). The ubiquitous trope of 'la nouvelle french touch' that appeared in the fashion discourse in inverted commas as an import from the world of Hollywood in 2006, is now simply stated. There is even advertising for YSL which has the text in English with a French translation underneath (*Elle*, 3 September 2007).

Furthermore, rather than there being a dichotomy between creativity and commercialism in the discourse, creativity is now represented as the basis of commercialism: 'la maison Chanel montre ainsi sa puissance, car tous ces artisans de luxe lui appartiennent.' (*Le Monde*, 11 December 2007). Fashion is once more the Barthesian *forme* through which the commercial credibility of France is communicated: 'Aujourd'hui, le numéro un mondial du luxe est un groupe français, LVMH, qui affiche au premier trimestre 2006 un chiffre d'affaires de 3,6 milliards d'euros, en progression de 12%' (*Elle*, 29 May 2006: 94).

Conclusion: Plus ça change...

In conclusion, French fashion discourse continues to play a significant role in the production of national identity. It still creates a mythology around the industry and the nation that centres on the traditional paradigms of superior creativity and taste. Mme Sarkozy has been configured as a latter-day icon for French fashion and designers. However, rather than relying on reified models of French High culture to signify French ascendancy, the discourse now attempts to subvert the mass-market and competitive designers by representing French fashion as more authentic and true to fashion's principles. In other words, it has reconfigured the paradigm of Fashion itself to re-enter the field. Moreover, there is a growing recognition that in the globalized market France needs to view itself in a global context and embrace a 'coagulation d'écoles de style'; the world and its global language, English, have been synthesized into the fashion rhetoric. Nonetheless, it would seem that Fashion and its discourse still represent an important means of conveying that 'le made in France est encore un label'.

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Notes

ⁱ This expression is used in *L'usage des plaisirs* to describe a discourse that is the locus of key ideological issues which are represented or disguised as moral problems (Foucault, 1984: 8-21).

ⁱⁱ The edict of October 29 1793 stated that: 'Nulle personne de l'un ou l'autre sexe ne pourra contraindre aucun citoyen ou citoyenne à se vêtir d'une façon particulière, sous peine d'être traitée comme suspecte et poursuivie comme perturbateur du repos public; chacun est libre de porter tel vêtement ou ajustement de son sexe qui lui convient.' (Perrot, 1981 : 38).

ⁱⁱⁱ For more on the development of the fashion industry and the fashion press during the nineteenth century see also: Anon, 1992; Sullerot, 1963; Ormen-Corpet, 200; Miller, 1981; Perrot, 1981 and Vanier, 1960.

^{iv} The Thompson and Peugeot factories produced 4,800,000 crinolines a year between them between 1858 and 1860 for example. Perrot (1981: 160).

^v In 'Le Mythe, aujourd'hui' Barthes argues that in order for a myth to be effective there must be congruence between the form and the concept. Thus fashion's synonymy with the changing face of French society is not without significance in its mythical appropriation. 'La motivation est nécessaire à la duplicité même du mythe: le mythe joue de l'analogie du sens et de la forme; pas de mythe sans forme motivée.' (Barthes, 1957: 234).

^{vi} There is not space here to discuss the numerous critical discourses on fashion but see for example: the speech on 'le luxe effréné des femmes' made by M. Le Procureur Général Dupin during a petition against prostitution (Feydeau, 1866: 195-205); or Charles du Pouey's comments in his *Causerie critique sur la femme* (1869: 14-15); or Dupanloup, the Archbishop of Orléans's, polemic on female education and modern materialism (1868).

^{vii} In *Le Peintre de la vie moderne*, Baudelaire argues that fashion is one of the key expressions of modernity: 'le beau est fait d'un élément éternel, invariable, dont la quantité est excessivement difficile à déterminer, et d'un élément relatif, circonstanciel, qui sera, si l'on veut tour à tour ou tout ensemble, l'époque, la mode, la morale, la passion.' (Baudelaire, 1968: 550).

^{viii} It is worth noting that the other totems of French High Culture: Haute Cuisine and French cinema also found themselves in a cultural diaspora where their paradigms were no longer relevant to the field.