

*Jean Jacquard considers the place of fashion in the modern world.*

- 1 In Lauren Weisberger's novel *The Devil Wears Prada*, wide-eyed girl Andrea Sachs is hired as assistant to a wicked Miranda Priestly, a high profile and enviably successful editor of *Runway* magazine. It does not take long for Sachs to realise that her job, which countless girls would die for, may just kill her, for Priestly epitomises the boss from hell: she is verbally abusive to her staff, disdainful to their lack of intelligence, unsympathetic to their predicament and uncompromising on the impracticable tasks she delegates. Moreover, striving to stay at the top of the industry and to achieve the bottom line gives impetus to outrageous behaviour – gossiping in tabloids, spreading slanders about others at cocktail parties and trading sensitive corporate information for personal gain. The vicissitudes of life in the fashion industry make Sachs question if her job is worth the price of her soul, even if she succeeds. Beneath the glamour and glitz, the fashion industry, at least in fiction, is depraved and deleterious. 5 10
- 2 In the real world, fashion just means a popular style of clothing, her manners and habits at a particular time or place. But fashion has always played a striking role in culture and religion. Traditionally, in settled societies, the 'clothes' fashioned from carcasses protected man from the elements of the weather. Before the ancient mysteries of the world and the universe were probed and understood by science, superstitious man performed rituals mainly for symbolic value and religious obligations and ideals. Significantly, the first products of their ingenuity for these rituals were the attire and accessories that the tribe must don, even when production techniques were rudimentary. At some point in time, when knowledge and science equipped man with the means to survive and progress from the primitive style of living, raw hide was replaced by fine fabric made from cotton and silk, as seen in the vestments and robes worn by the clergy and monks; crude enamels and bones were replaced by gemstones, and jewellery has become an inseparable part of the elaborate, ornate finish. Today, we expect worshippers to wear their best clothes to church services, and hence the colloquial term 'Sunday best'. To dress smart and be stylish is to be decorous and to observe social etiquette. 15 20 25
- 3 Fashion pervades all spheres of our lives because of our innate desire to look good and to create beautiful things. The way we look is an essential part of who we are and how we feel. Arguably, the first person to be enlightened by the power of fashion is the teenager when she learns that she must break the rule of wearing the school uniform to assert her individuality. Imagine the contentment derived from the radically revised sense of who she is, or who she can be! Such a mysterious, complex and transformative power of the self through fashion is inscrutable, but we can invoke the convenient term 'self-esteem' to explain the unfathomable attraction to such an almost metaphysical change. This does not, as one might think, justify the erroneous claim that women are slaves to fashion. The 'petty', 'superficial preoccupation' with the hemline's length or the height of a heel is merely emblematic, for what truly matters is that the continually evolving styles of clothing, driven by demand and devised by designers, reflects broader shifts in customs and attitudes. For one, we have witnessed the formal clothing of the 1900's give way to more relaxed, practical attire when many rigid social conventions gradually loosened. 30 35
- 4 Today, fashion is an established branch of human knowledge, technology and industry. It provides employment and is a lucrative profession for designers, tailors, models, journalists and advertisers. Fashion shows are held in major cities that have become centres of high fashion: London, Milan, New York and Paris – one indisputable reason these cities are vibrant and alluring. Fashion is indivisible from, and supports, other art forms – the exquisite, exotic cheongsams worn by Maggie Cheung in Kar Wai Wong's film *In The Mood For Love* were widely discussed by the fashion press as much as film critics debated on its artistic direction. Jean Paul Gaultier, the enfant terrible of French fashion, designed the wardrobe of many motion pictures too, including Pedro Almodóvar's *Kika* and most notably, Peter Greenaway's *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife & Her Lover*. And publications such as *Harper's Bazaar*, *Marie Claire* and *Vogue* cater to readers who are concerned with leisure and luxury. A good fashion sense also helps one gain favourable opinion and be taken more seriously at the workplace. 40 45 50

- 5 It is not easy to appreciate and understand fashion though, despite it being intricately linked to one's life, in every significant occasion ranging from the cheerful birthday celebration to the lugubrious funeral. Fashion suffers its fair share of badgering and scorn. For the longest time, fashion has been a signifier of rank structures. The elites have been alleged to wear haute couture to distinguish themselves from the commoners, using fashion to preserve and legitimise social differences. Interestingly, the commoners use fashion as a means to emulate their social superiors, and this explains the pathological rush towards designer labels. Nowadays, fashion labels have become multi-national brands catering to the global market by cookie-cutter mass production. This manic rush is further fuelled by manipulative advertising, which is also charged with perpetuating the contemporary ideal of feminine beauty – thinness. 55
- 6 And the world of fashion is fraught with intractable problems. Farming out production work to factories in developing countries is contentious, for it causes loss of jobs in the home country and sweatshop workers often work in hazardous environments for long hours for abnormally low pay. In France, the proposed bill against garments that cover the face and body – known as burqas or niqabs – in public places roused vehement protests from the Muslim community. When American First Lady Michelle Obama wore a dress by Cuban-American designer Narciso Rodriguez on a trip to France in 2009, her stylish facade garnered vast press coverage and eclipsed the political agenda of the meeting between the two countries. And the British Royal family was embarrassed by the public chorus of disapproval when Prince Harry was caught by the paparazzi wearing a German uniform with a swastika armband at a costume party. Unhesitatingly, the media brashly features wayward pop-culture models, celebrities and eccentric fashion designers merely to sensationalise their 'debauched' lifestyles panned by moralists in puritanical society. 65
- 7 In 1980, the androgynous David Bowie had a hit single *Fashion* in which he said, 'There's a brand new dance, but I don't know its name.' The idea that fashion is capricious and mindless still reverberates today as Lady Gaga asserts in her song similarly titled to Bowie's, 'I live to be model thin; dress me, I'm your mannequin; I am anyone you want me to be.' If fashion is that unpredictable, then no one can confidently say a celebrity's or designer's style will be remembered and applauded in ten years' time, other than by a coterie of devotees. We forget this fact when a celebrity or designer dies; and then we forget the celebrity or designer himself. Perhaps Oscar Wilde was right when he said, "Fashion is a form of ugliness so intolerable that we have to alter it every six months." 75

In this article, Jean Jacquard comments on the importance of fashion to society and how it can be useful, and at the same time, problematic to us.

How far do you agree with his observations on fashion and clothing? Illustrate your answer or own views by referring to the ways in which you and your society regard fashion.

AQ rephrased: *What is the importance and usefulness of FASHION, and how is it also problematic to you and your society?*

If we went with Jacquard's definition of fashion, in our multi-cultural Singapore, there would be very little commonality in our sense of dress and behaviour. As a mix of different cultures, each identified with its own unique style of dress and customs, Singaporeans are still in a quandary over a national dress we can call our own. However, if there is a style Singaporeans default to, it is an informal shorts, t-shirt, flip-flops ensemble that cuts across practically all ethnicities, age groups and even gender. I'm not sure Jacquard would classify this style as "fashion" as it is hardly "smart and stylish" in the way the he – and the French in general – probably appreciate.

Our dress sense, though, is indeed indicative of the Singaporean culture, as Jacquard observes. But while the French are interested in making "beautiful things", Singaporeans are much more interested in making practical things as efficiently as possible. Our economy thrives on speed, efficiency and utility as a financial; trading; shipping and transit hub. There is no time to be beautiful, it's more like receive-process-deliver as quickly as possible. Likewise, our dress sense tends towards whatever is fastest to wear with the least amount of fuss, while keeping ourselves cool in our blazing tropical weather.

By and large, fashion does not have a high priority on the average Singaporean's shopping list. As such, we have little to boast about our fashion industry, which is practically non-existent. The few brave fashion designers that we do occasionally celebrate usually make their names in cities that Jacquard is more familiar with. Asian cities such as Tokyo, Seoul and Shanghai do have thriving fashion industries – Singaporean fashion celebrities Charles + Keith got their start in Hong Kong – but local Singaporean fashionistas are few and tend to run home-based operations via blogshop for a small but interested clientele.

If anyone in Singapore pursues fashion, it is more likely to be the super-rich. Even so, they tend to dress to the occasion. While there is a rich-poor gap, unlike Jacquard's society the Singaporean rich try not to look too much different from the commoner. It may be that in Jacquard's society, it has been historically important to segregate the aristocracy from the peasantry through the conspicuous consumption of the former, but the foundation of Singaporean society is that we all started at the bottom though some of us have managed to work our way to the top. Thus, Singaporeans generally hate show-offs and our people avoid standing out by conforming to the default dress mode – sloppy.

Hence, while fashion may mean a great deal to Jacquard and his society, it is hardly worth mentioning in mine. Since everyone agrees to adhere to our common, practical dress code, it's safe to say that in Singapore, sloppy never goes out of style.