

Grzegorz A. KLEPARSKI, Sławomir KOZIOL

DANDIES WITH HAMMERS AND LADIES IN PLASTIC: THE BEGINNINGS OF POP FASHION IN GREAT BRITAIN

Great Britain emerged from the Second World War a victorious but greatly impoverished country. The next several years was the period of economic austerity, as the whole energy of the nation was used in rebuilding of the country. The effort began to pay off in the early fifties with the disappearance of rationing and in the mid-fifties a new age of affluence appeared on the horizon.

The improvement in economic conditions was felt throughout the whole society, but it was working class which experienced relatively the greatest rise in their income. Working-class masses found for the first time that they could afford more than just essentials, and the manufacturers and producers were only too ready to satisfy their demands. In this way ordinary people began to feel the power of their aesthetic judgement and thus with the economic assurance came cultural one.¹ People felt new licence to like kitsch – to read comics and pulp fiction, watch Hollywood movies, listen to popular music. And as the working-class cultural consumption was soon followed by cultural production, a new kind of total culture appeared – **pop culture**.

It was pop fashion which allowed the British working-class masses for the first outbreaks of creativity in the emerging culture. Strangely enough, the lead in the field was taken by the working-class male youth, who created the most conspicuous pop styles in fashion. And although the girls soon followed their example, they never created their own style like **teddy boys** and later **mods** did.

The notoriety of male pop fashion was so great because the change here was by far greater than in female fashion. Male pop fashion was not only a change of

¹ An art critic Lawrence Alloway wrote: *The definition of culture is changing as a result of the pressure of the great audience, which is no longer new but experienced in the consumption of its arts. Therefore, it is no longer sufficient to define culture solely as something that a minority guards for the few and the future (though such art is uniquely valuable and as precious as ever). Our definition of culture is being stretched beyond the fine art limits imposed on it by Renaissance theory, and refers now, increasingly, to the whole complex of human activities* (Alloway 1993:702–703).

a particular style, it was a change of the whole attitude to fashion. Up to the time of pop, male clothes were discreet and serious. In contrast to women's fashion, which was supposed to make them attractive to the opposite sex, the motivation behind men's clothes was to denote status (Harris 1986:21).

This tradition was to change with the incoming economic prosperity in the nineteen-fifties. While the jobs of young workers may well have continued to be as dead end as before the war, their wages had risen substantially and their spending power doubled (see Chambers (1985:26)). Devoid of the ambitions connected with work and having much money to spend young workers turned all their energy and money to their leisure time.

Teddy Boys were the first group which could be included among various manifestations of pop culture. They appeared in the mid-fifties and they were a new kind of people in the street – young working-class men who, for the first time relatively free of economical and cultural constraints, self-consciously began to create their own image. By appropriating the style of clothes of upper class young men and *crossing it with a cinematic 'hard-boiled' American idiom* (Chambers 1985:28), they created an air of artificiality around them, a feeling of their being out-of-place which made meeting them in the street somewhat of a shocking experience. Their tight trousers and long jackets with their velvet collars bore absolutely no relation to their past. It was their choice, unconstrained by any considerations that mattered. In a society in which one's clothes reflected, more or less, the clothes of one's parents it was a real breakthrough. Unwittingly, teddy boys showed that clothes could be just an arbitrary facade and not a sanctified reflection of one's position in the world.

To make themselves more notorious, along with aristocratic clothes teddy boys appropriated American rock'n'roll. It was useful as it was not music for connoisseurs, for contemplative listening – it drew its force from its power of shocking. *It was music to be used rather than listened to: a banner to be waved in the face of 'them' by a group who felt themselves ignored or victimised* (Melly 1989:34). Music with no serious content or meaning but perfect in the creation of a shocking style.

Teddy boys disappeared after a few years but they prepared the way for another subculture, which soon became the embodiment of British pop culture. In the early sixties Great Britain was at the peak of economic prosperity, the fact reflected by the increased consumption in all the strata of society. It was against this background of the so-called 'affluent society' that there appeared a group of young male working class youth who made 'furious consumption' the main characteristic of their style. It was consumption for the sake of consumption, but along strictly defined lines which allowed them to differentiate their style from any other of the emerging pop culture. They came to be known as mods.

According to George Melly, initially the word *mod* meant a small group of young working class boys who *formed a small totally committed little mutual*

admiration society totally devoted to clothes (Melly 1989:168). They were first working-class **dandies** who used each other as looking glasses. Unlike the defiantly obtrusive teddy boys, the mods were more subtle and subdued in appearance: they wore apparently conservative suits in respectable colours, they were fastidiously neat and tidy. Even their weapons (used against **rockers** in their notorious gang fights), were nice for the eye – chromium-plated hammers and screwdrivers.

As the ‘mod’ fashion spread it embraced other leisure activities – patronising particular clubs and musical venues, buying certain records, riding stylish Italian scooters. What was most important for them was detail: *it had to be the **Blue Beat** hat worn just at that angle, two vents in the jacket, **The Scene** club in Soho, **US soul** and **Jamaican ska** music, a personalised **Lambretta TV 175*** (see Chambers 1985:78–79) Dashing aboard their scooters from tailor to record shop, from record shop to club, from club to dancing hall, fuelled most of the time with amphetamines, mods created a world within a world, their own universe which, although limited to nights and weekends, was governed by their own rules and responded to their own needs.

The ‘hard-core’ teddy boys or mods were not very numerous, nevertheless, their styles turned out to be quite influential. The young males (not necessarily of working class origin), who did not want to participate directly in a particular subculture were nonetheless aware of an alternative youth culture from that suggested by the official agencies and could take sides just by accepting certain stylistic suggestions offered by teds or mods. At the same time they could add touches of their own creativity to create their own personal style.

During the sixties the mod phenomenon contributed greatly to the development of boutiques in Carnaby Street and its environs, which soon became world famous as the centre of new fashion and a new London spectacle equal to the Tower or the Changing of the Guard. Tourists from all over Europe were pouring into London for cheap weekends. They could buy lots and lots of clothes for virtually nothing as the exchange rate was very good. *London was vibrating with French, Italians, Germans and Swedes coming to listen to the music, see the shops and gawk at the beautiful girls* (see Hulanicki 1995:234). For the mod revolution, although it started out as a totally male concept, was a witness to the appearance of female pop fashion.

In the early years of pop culture girls were still supposed to be home-bound beings and their involvement in any kind of ‘street life’ could mean only one thing – their moral breakdown. What was left to them was listening to records in the security of their bedrooms and, on Saturday nights, showing themselves in crowded dance halls. This domination of male youngsters in the earliest stage of pop may well be ascribed to the still lingering influence of the traditional, male orientated culture. But in pop culture, with its stress on the surface value of things, the fixed codes of behaviour and the established place of women in

society were losing importance. Thus, after the initial, forced restraint female youngsters could add their creativity to the new culture.

While male pop fashion was a *general upsurge rather than the work of any one man* (Melly 1989:166), the beginnings of its female counterpart are usually ascribed to one person – **Mary Quant**.² She opened her boutique, Bazaar, in London's King's Road already in 1955. She used strong, unusual colours and put them together in strange combinations. Her clothes were playful and uninhibited, contrasting strongly with the restrained designs of traditional fashion designers:

She chucked lady-like accessories into the dustbin, recognised the irrelevancy of looking like a virgin, took into account that pavements and restaurants were not muddy hunting fields nor parties and dances the antechambers of morgues. Innocent and tough, she attacked the whole rigid structure of rag trade and won hands down and skirts up (see Melly 1989:165).

However, it took Quant several years to impose her attitude to fashion upon the wider public. One of the reasons of this was the fact that her clothes were relatively expensive. It was only when boutiques for less well-off clientele began to spring up in the wake of Bazaar (among them Biba, *a brilliant mass-produced variation adjusted for a time when more girls with less money were ready for 'far out' clothes* (Melly 1989:166)), that a new mood in female fashion appeared in full swing. In 1964 the first shop for girls opened in Carnaby Street, *originally an all-male preserve* (Melly 1989:173). Thus, girls and young women from the lower strata of society were finally beginning to come up with mods' passion for fashion.

The pop dandies welcomed this development. They realized that they could use fashionable girls as a background underlining their own male splendour. The girls playing this role came to be known as **dollies**:

All had long clean hair, preferably blonde, interchangeable pretty faces, interchangeable long legs. They represented girls as objects to an extraordinary degree. They produced a kind of generalized rather half-hearted lust triggered off by their ever-shortening mini-skirts (see Melly 1989:172).

Dollies, however, represented only a part of the emerging kind of female fancy fashion. What was most important was that this fashion was not only for the rich and frivolous. The lower prices meant lower quality, but this fact was not a drawback in the era of pop. The emphasis was put on the impact, not make. Pop clothes were not comfortable, either. Barbara Hulanicki, the founder of Biba, wrote in her memoirs of *the uncomfortable Biba smock that itched* and of *long skinny sleeves [...] so tight they hindered the circulation* (Hulanicki, quoted in Harris 1986:112). Various strange materials were used. Plastic, because of its

² Quant herself was rather modest about her achievement: *We were in at the beginning of a tremendous renaissance in fashion. It was not happening because of us. It was simply that, as things turned out, we were part of it* (M. Quant, quoted in Harris 1986:19).

associations with space age, was extremely popular.³ There were also paper dresses and dresses covered with metal.

In pop culture, the way you dressed became all-important. Clothes, whether male or female, no longer had to follow the patterns of the slowly changing, inert, traditional fashion usually reflecting one's social status. One could now chose among the fast changing styles promoted by numerous boutiques or invent her or his own original, personal style, often using clothes that had had their heyday a long time ago. Thus the personal style was more and more eclectic. Angela Carter calls this new phenomenon in fashion **mutability** and gives an example:

A young girl, invited to a party, left to herself (no mother to guide her), might well select the following ensemble: a Mexican cotton wedding dress (though she's not a bride, probably no virgin, either – thus at one swoop turning a garment which in its original environment is an infinitely potent symbol into a piece of decoration); her grandmother's button boots (once designed to show off the small feet and moneyed leisure of an Edwardian middle class who didn't need to work and rarely had to walk); her mother's fox fur (bought to demonstrate her father's status); and her old school beret dug out of the loft because she saw Faye Dunaway in Bonnie and Clyde (and a typical role-definition garment changes gear) (Carter 1995: 316–317).

Thus clothes ceased to reflect anything beside the wearer's fancy. The rapidity of the changes of style and their arbitrariness reflected the aesthetics of surface, which was establishing itself in the culture of western societies. One could change his or her fantasy self as quickly as one wanted and without any consequences – on the surface everything can move fast. All this was done in the hope that one of these surface selves could arrest attention of a greater public (how great this public was depended on the impersonator's ambitions), and thus assure a 'fame for fifteen minutes'.

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³ In POPism Andy Warhol remembers meeting at a party a girl wearing a fashionable dress: *The girl next to me in a plastic Courreges dress, sweating, said that wearing it was like sitting naked on a kitchen chair; it was sticking to her* (Warhol 1996:115).