Summary of “Celebrity and the Logic of Fashion”

This paper grows out of Nancy Troy’s work on a book, Couture and Culture: Fashion and the Marketing of Modernism. Inquiring into the nature of the relationship between art, theater and the fashion industry in early 20th-century France and America, the study focuses on the activities of the couturier, designer, entrepreneur, collector and patron of the arts, Paul Poiret (1879-1944), examining his self-construction and performance as celebrity and artist through his patronage of architects, painters and graphic artists and through the extremely sophisticated marketing schemes he developed to sell his clothes, perfume and furniture creations. Of particular interest in terms of celebrity, are the commercial uses to which Poiret and other French couturiers put not only art and fashion but also their engagement with the theatrical stage. Fashion shows of the period mimicked dramatic productions in the contemporary theater, but the theater also put the couture house on stage, indicating that traditional theater was subject to the same popularization and commercialization that threatened the elite status of the visual arts and haute couture.
Background

Professor Troy provided us with a slide show presentation about Poiret and his historical context. While art historians and museum exhibitions tend to focus on formal issues when they concentrate on fashion design, Troy concentrates instead on how couturiers constructed themselves and their designs in a market economy. Using this approach to Poiret, we find that his work calls into question the difference between high and low culture, theatre and fashion, artists and celebrities, and the original and the commodity.

Poiret presented himself to the world as an elite artist with no commercial interests, while he worked behind the scenes to market and advertise his products to the widest popular audience. Poiret forged a strong connection between fashion and high art, particularly fashion and theatre. He designed elaborate gowns for the stage and threw spectacular costume parties at his home, where his elite clientele could pass across the built-in stage and pretend to be stars in their own right. Poiret developed promotional methods that are now required for media savvy designers: he used actresses to market his perfume, he created a cult of personality for himself, he published lush brochures about his products, and he worked tirelessly to promote his label and to enforce consistent branding on his extensive product line. Poiret also used live models to display his clothes, and he would display films of his models when he traveled around the world promoting his clothing.

Poiret was very concerned about strategically restricting the availability of his products in order to make them more valuable and more desirable to his rich
Parisian clients. In order to increase his empire, though, and to sell more clothes, he created the notion of a “genuine reproduction,” a copy of his work that he would allow other designated tailors to manufacture at discounted prices. The balance was a difficult one to maintain and, after World War I, Poiret had squandered his money, lost his art collection, and even lost the right to his own brand name.

**Respondent, Dr. Judith Blumenthal, Marshall School of Business**

Dr. Blumenthal, who trained buyers and executives at I. Magnin Department Store in the mid 70s, explained how department stores developed in the late nineteenth century and why the business model was so successful. Department stores took advantage of several post-Civil War developments, including the rise of ready-to-wear lines and the creation of plate glass, to completely change the experience of shopping. Department stores transformed the process of buying clothing and accessories by becoming the middle-man in what used to be a direct exchange between designers and customers. These giant stores established fixed prices for products and provided the convenience of one-stop shopping for an unprecedented number of products. Like Poiret, department stores created glamorous environments for their goods, and they made Parisian fashion available to customers who would have had to go to Paris to buy them.

While the department store model was extremely effective, Blumenthal argued that Poiret’s schizophrenic business model eventually collapsed not just
because of World War I, but because he had tried to play it both ways: he tried to create a business that identified itself as high-art and “super couture,” while also embracing mass production for his designs. Historically, these contradictory business models have not worked.

**Respondent Professor Professor Eugen Weber, UCLA History Department**

Professor Weber argued that Poiret is special not because of his self-serving marketing strategies but because he developed the first integrated luxury industry and he made his products available to an unprecedented number of consumers. This business model is so familiar to us now – consider Dior, Calvin Klein, Ralph Lauren, and the vast LVMH empire – that we tend to take it for granted. Poiret was also responsible for inventing, or at lease raising to the level of haute couture, certain foundation garments for women. His elastic girdles and boneless corsets were (relatively speaking) emancipatory new accessories for women, considering how restrictive ladies intimate apparel had been before. Poiret also claimed to be the inventor of garter belts and flesh colored hose, and he created formal dresses that could be slipped on and off without a maid. In short, Poiret had a huge effect on the business of fashion, and one might argue that he played an important role in democratizing luxury and creating a world of conspicuous consumption.

Professor Weber took issue with the tone of Professor Troy’s paper: he felt that the paper reflected a sense of disapproval for Poiret’s covert marketing strategies. Weber argued that Poiret’s public denial of his own commercial
impulses is a typically French attitude, one that characterized most businessmen in France at the time. And, unlike a shrewd businessman, Poiret was not myopically focused on the bottom line; in fact, he was actually a spend-thrift who paid no attention to costs or accounts in his quest for luxury and quality. Weber ended by comparing Poiret with William Morris, the British craftsman, designer, writer, typographer, and socialist. Morris redefined “Art” to include everything within the man-made environment, including wallpaper, stained glass, and typeface. While Morris was a utopian socialist, and Poiret might be described as a utopian elitist, both were reactionaries against what Morris called the “dull squalor of civilisation.”

**Modernism, Marketing, and Gender**

The following discussion was wide-ranging and, as Nancy Lutkehaus pointed out, it was characterized by the interdisciplinary nature of our group. Referring to Professor Weber’s comments, Professor Troy admitted that she is so close to her project that she can’t really tell what her tone is anymore. She suspects, however, that her training as a purist modernist art historian has contributed to her pejorative attitude toward Poiret’s marketing strategies, and it has shaped her inclination to value and respect uniqueness and originality, the cornerstones of the modernist aesthetic. Arnold Heidsieck suggested, however, that modernism is far more inclusive of commercialism than Troy had implied; so much so, that one cannot consider them as opposing concepts. Richard Fliegel suggested that the underlying ambivalence in Troy’s paper is due to the fact that
she is critical of Poiret as a marketer because she’s studying him from the perspective of an art historian: if she were studying him as a marketing scholar might, she would probably write about his fantastic accomplishments.

Leo Braudy concentrated on the central contradiction in Poiret’s business philosophy: his effort to mass market elite items whose value is partly derived from their relative inaccessibility. Poiret tried his best to mass market exclusivity: what does this mean and what are the ramifications of this? Poiret eventually fails to maintain the balance between his elite identity and his mercantile instincts: is there a way in which this is connected to gender? Does Poiret’s business fail after World War I because women’s roles had changed?

Professor Troy suggested that Poiret had a huge effect on women’s attitudes toward beauty at the time, especially because he used tall, rail-thin models. While the clothes themselves could be seen as emancipatory, fashionable women were subject to a new kind of restriction because they were encouraged to internalize the thin ideal that Poiret’s models embodied.

Mark Kann took issue with the group’s assumption that Poiret’s wares were really being marketed to a “mass” audience of women. Were African-American maids targeted in Poiret’s advertising campaigns? Most certainly not. The target audience had hardly changed at all: Poiret had barely reached beyond fine ladies of leisure to include the upper middle-class ladies who couldn’t quite afford to go to Paris every season to buy fashionable clothing.
Suggestions for the Paper

- reevaluate the tone of the paper
- reevaluate whether Poiret’s behavior was actually contradictory or just “French”!
- look at the role of World War I and the changing role of women in the demise of Poiret's business
- review the Social History of Intimate Apparel and Vanessa Schwartz’s book Spectacular Realities, and think about why, in the late nineteenth century, Americans and Europeans began buying amusements rather than making them themselves
- do more research on pricing to see just how expensive Poiret’s products were and who was able to afford them
- consider further Professor Heidsieck’s question: what would fashion have been in America without Poiret?

Participants

Johanna Blakley, The Norman Lear Center
Judith Blumenthal, Business and Alumni Affairs
Leo Braudy, English
Richard Fliegel, General Studies
Arnold Heidsieck, German
Mark Kann, Political Science
Nancy Lutkehaus, Anthropology
Steven Ross, History
Nancy Troy, Art History
Eugen Weber, History, UCLA
Endnotes

¹ This is Nancy Troy’s summary of her paper.