

## **Popularizing haute couture: acceptance and resistance to the New Look in the post-1945 United States**

Treated as a field of cultural activity (Evans and Thornton 48), fashion offers a promising and multifaceted research opportunity. It may be defined as an element of high culture (*haute couture*) or as a popular cultural activity (*prêt-à-porter*). *Haute couture*, in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century still created mainly in Paris, used to be constructed as the reflection of the high status and position of its wearers. After some modifications and simplifications (change of material, shortening of dress etc.), it was negotiated and adopted by the middling strata of the society. After transferring to other cultures, such as that of the United States, *haute couture* was frequently reconstructed, adjusted and transformed to be more consistent with a given country's ideals and specificity.

Ultimately, in the process of the cultural redefinition, Parisian *haute couture* fashion became more popularized. The transformation of high culture into pop culture entails making the latter from the resources of the former. A lack of resources, according to John Fiske, is characteristic of subordinated and disempowered people who, in opposition to or escaping from hegemonic forces, create pop culture (1-4). The relationship of the popular culture to structures of dominance may be two-fold: it may take the form of either resistance or evasion (Fiske 4). However, Fiske's argument seems to be incomplete for an analysis of a cultural transfer that took place during a struggle for cultural, social, and political dominance—in this case—the Cold War. In such circumstances, pop culture became a sphere of negotiation and a war for cultural hegemony.

Individualism, opportunity, and classlessness: these were, according to the American historian Christian G. Appy, the dominant concepts of American ideology during the Cold War (2). Liberal American values and the quest for freedom ideologically confronted Communism. At the same time, the United States—presenting itself as a liberating power—also aimed to strengthen its influence in Europe in the sphere of culture (Guilbaut 193). Fashion therefore became one of the fields of rivalry for trans-Atlantic cultural dominance.

Hitherto, scholars have focused on Europe's reaction to American culture during the Cold War (Kroes, Kuisel, Wagnleitner). They have explored the process of Americanization as well as the political and cultural hegemony of the United States in the postwar years. They have concluded that after the initial resistance and the struggle to safeguard "Europeaness," American culture was gradually adopted in Western European countries (such as France and Austria). They have also argued that cultural rivalry between Europe and the United States during the Cold War was depicted as a struggle between "European civilization" and "American consumerism." Only a few of scholars, like Serge Guilbaut in *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, analyzed the responses of Americans to cultural phenomena (such as art) from Europe. Nevertheless, the conclusions of Kroes or Kuisel provide an ample foundation for the analysis of trans-Atlantic cultural rivalry during the Cold War, seen from the perspective of America.

The reception of the New Look fashion in the post-1945 United States serves as a good case study to explore if and how the high culture from Paris design was accepted or rejected, negotiated, or transformed into American mainstream culture. The weekly *Life* from the years 1945-1948 is an appropriate source for analysis as the magazine was the first American publication to "tell stories with pictures;" thus, it may be treated as the predecessor of visual media. Having a high circulation of more than 3 million and being directed to both sexes from all social groups (though mainly the middle class), *Life* exerted substantial influence on American attitudes (Gregory 249; Peterson 89). In contrast with fashion magazines, it was directed to a wider audience and was supposedly more impartial to design trends than magazines such as *Vogue*. Significantly, *Life* reported thoroughly on the phenomenon of the New Look and its appropriation by American people, providing both artistic and practical pictorial coverage of the design.

World War II internationalized cultural influences, transmitting them from one side of the Atlantic to the other, and boosted the mass market. It modified, at least for a period of time, gender relations and roles, revolutionizing women's priorities and altering the vision of femininity (Craik 78). The war effort engaged ordinary Americans on the Home Front, imposing on them rationing of food products (such as coffee, sugar, meat) and prompting them to save materials (paper, nylon, cotton, wood, rubber) (Perrett 400). Having an influence on all spheres of life, the war also left its stamp on the world of fashion.

American pre-war fashion culture was created through the negotiation between national elements and outer influences (Welters and Cunningham 1-3). In the 1920s and 1930s—the time of shifting power relations between France and the

United States in the fashion market—Paris design was followed in America due to sheer snobbery. It was perceived as more elegant, extravagant and sophisticated. French women were promoted as role models for American women. At the same time, American customers were being offered “alternative fashion systems” from their country’s designers. These were developed to meet the specific needs of the large American markets (Craik 60). As a result, tensions between Paris and New York arose. The “American look” before the war was a compromise between the Parisian influence and American more practical mass production. Significantly, the fashion of the interwar period embodied a shift in the vision of femininity, symbolized by the abandonment of the corset associated with Victorianism and women’s subordination. The decade of the 1920s was epitomized by the decadent but simplified and less feminine (with shorter shirts and dresses) outfit of the flapper, which became popular both in America and Europe (Conor 173-174). In the economically turbulent period of the 1930s, the skirts lengthened and the corset was back. During the Great Depression, feminine clothes spurred memories of the old stable times. At the same time, the financial crisis brought back home sewing and remaking of old clothes due to economic necessity.

The time of war rationing and shortages brought substantial changes to fashion design. It came under the influence of government regulation and was constructed as an element of patriotic support for the war. Due to fabric shortages, in March 1942 the War Production Board issued the directive L-85 that regulated every aspect of clothing. It restricted the usage of certain fabrics such as nylon, silk, and wool that were needed for war production (Duis 28; Graham and Wander 450). American designers were expected to follow the regulation, creating, in patriotic zeal, clothes that would keep in line with the government directive. A similar role was to be played by the media: under war censorship they had to act in accordance with the regulations. The expectations were fulfilled by *Life*. The magazine devoted a significant proportion of its pages to promoting the “patriotic” look. It presented, in rich illustrative frame, shortened skirts, pocket-less jackets, men’s suits without vests, trousers and sleeves without cuffs—all designed to save the largest possible amount of fabric (Women Lose Pockets and Frills to Save Fabrics 70-71). *Life* also recommended “home sewing” (*Life’s Dress* 51-52) and courses where women were taught how to make clothes from scraps, use old materials or sew two pieces of clothing from one old item (*Salvage Fashion Fair Shows How to Make Wearable Clothes from Scraps* 94). Home sewing and clothes remaking, which were treated as an embarrassing necessity in the 1930s, became acts of patriotism during the war.

By the end of 1943, the austere wartime fashion was used by the United States as a means of cultural influence and was exported as such into European countries. Dresses and coats sewn in accordance with the recommendations of the War Production Board were to alleviate clothing shortages in liberated countries. The simple outfit created by the government agency was lauded by *Life* as “a model of savings” as it had no cuffs, buttons, hems, zippers, pockets, or any metal pieces. Single-size dresses were to be adjusted simply by tightening or loosening of the belt made of the same material. Shoes were produced of linen, with only heel and toes made of leather. “Europe’s clothes,” as *Life* called them, were presented by a serious looking young woman (Europe’s Clothes 49-51).

The process of sending American clothes to Europe was a reversal of a time-honored dynamic of cultural export and import. Instead of Paris offering its superior clothes to America, it was now the United States—a liberating power—that was sending its design, causing Europeans to look like Americans. The outfits were to endow Europe with the sense of American material reality during the war and to make Europeans resemble Americans physically. By exporting its clothes, America was also sending abroad its popular culture and its fundamental set of values, such as simplicity, thrift, and egalitarianism. The clothes sent to Europe—where soles were made of cork and the scarcity of materials was even more severe—symbolized the American aid effort, a gift for poverty stricken European countries. Arguably, the clothes were to bestow on European people both a sense of gratitude as well as a feeling of resemblance and unity with Americans.

During the war, Paris couture had its moment of presence in America in the person of the wife of a French aviator (their names are not given). However, in this time of war austerity the new Parisian trend did not arouse the sort of interest that it would have caused in “normal times.” In fact, the new French collection was ridiculed by *Life* for its “vulgar exaggerations of the famous silhouettes,” and for its “bulky band [that] looks suitable for hefty German frau” (New Styles from Paris and New York 42). Without doubt, the reluctant or even hostile reception of these French clothes was provoked by its designers’ cooperation with the Nazis (Wilson 2003: 44). Clearly, for Americans the clothes were German (read: manufactured by the enemy), not French. As such, they were juxtaposed with American wartime clothing production—simple, elegant, and patriotic.

During the war the transmission of the Parisian *haute couture* design to the United States did not cease completely. However, the sense of patriotism and severe reality of the war made the American public averse to European clothes, now associated not with the elegant Parisian design but with Nazi manufacturing.

A non-American outfit, deprived of patriotic simplicity and practicality, was perceived as over-extravagant and vulgar. The war also brought a reversal of the cultural scenario of design transmission, with Americans sending their “patriotic” clothes to the countries of Europe.

With the end of the war, Paris reclaimed, at least for the time being, its hegemony in the field of fashion (Fashion Explosion 100). Lavish and feminine, the designs created by French couturier Christian Dior seemed to fulfill the desires of women weary of the simplicity and practicality of war-time clothing. With the financial help of the French cotton magnate Marcel Boussac, Dior opened his own fashion house in 1946. A year later, he debuted two collections (“the Carolle Line” and “the Figure Eight”). The first of them became emblematic of the style that would in 1948 be labeled the New Look (Breward 1995:191-192; Maynard 47). It was promoted in New York and Chicago by a doll couture theater: “a deliberate attempt to reassess the influence of the French couture industry by luring buyers back to Paris” (Maynard 47).

The New Look promoted a vision of femininity, epitomized in a full-bosom-and-curvedly-hipped hourglass figure, dressed in lace, fur, and diamonds (New Silhouette 133). Despite the patronage of large New York and San Francisco department stores (Maynard 45), its reception by the American public was far from unanimous fascination and acceptance. The reaction of Americans to the New Look was thoroughly covered by *Life*. The magazine described the trend in detail, illustrating its articles with numerous pictures of New Look clothes and accessories. *Life’s* presentation of the new style was fully in step with the dominant ideology of the Cold War. *Life* and other media publications drew on cultural phenomena (such as the New Look) to mold a new postwar cultural order.

The real coverage of the new fashion on the pages of *Life* started two years after the war. The New Look was depicted, for instance, in an article about spring suits published in March 1947 (Spring Suits 84-87). The suits exemplified the onset of a new era in fashion that allowed designers to use material lavishly after years of wartime fabric restrictions. Sporting longer jackets, skirts with pleats, and padded hips, cuffed gloves, ribbons and hats; the post-1945 outfit was a complete contradiction to and reversal of the dowdy wartime patriotic look. In March 1948, the magazine featured a full-length article with an interview with Christian Dior (I Know Women Well 84). The pictures accompanying the article depicted a full range of New Look clothes and accessories such as lengthy skirts, padded jackets, bras, girdles, corsets, false eye-lashes, hats, gloves, and feathers. They represented the new style’s poise and glamour and were characteristic of the new vision of femininity ushered in by the Parisian designer.

The magazine reported several times about the reactions of the American public to the new trend. The New Look produced an enthusiastic response on New York's 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue (the epicenter of the world of sophistication and fashion-wisdom). It was, according to one *Life* journalist, a sign that the new trend would take the nation by storm (*Life Presents a Review of Fall Fashions* 124). The magazine depicted female trendsetters (the editorial staff of a women's magazine, models, pedestrians on 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue) who were already practicing this new fashion religion, preached by the French couturier. Mass-manufactured dresses were poised to enable the New Look to reach the ordinary people. All these were promising indications that America would succumb to infection by the new trend from Paris (*Life Presents a Review of Fall Fashions* 124-125).

What prompted this radical shift in women's fashion after World War II? What was the cultural significance of the change, especially if analyzed in the context of a Parisian trend being imported into the United States? Elizabeth Wilson in *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity* suggests one answer: "The New Look introduced a full-blown romantic nostalgia into the austerity of the post-war world" (43). Indeed, the trend was a promise of a new postwar reality, at odds with the harsh and practical life of wartime. After the war, the cultural definition of femininity changed (Chafe 166-72; Lake 360-362). Its new vision was embodied in Dior's fashion (Craig 104). By the accentuation of women's breasts, waist and hips, the New Look drew attention to women's biological functions. Thus, it put a stress on women's roles as mothers and their ability to bear children. The lavish use of fabric, the length of skirts, and the emphasis on feminine contours were a contradiction to the war patriotic look with its rather androgynous and practical clothes that flattened the female figure and were intended to be worn while working in war industries. With the outbreak of peace, women could return to being full-time housewives, caring for hearth and home. And in line with this ideology, the New Look clothes were suitable for leisure, rather than work and were compatible with a life of domesticity (Bruzzi 207).

In addition, the style met the modern requirement of up-to-dateness. Fashion, being a constituent feature of modernity, embodied the unceasing search for what is new and admired and the avoidance of what is old and passé. It epitomized "perpetual innovation [and the] destruction of the old and the creation of the new" (Kellner 264). With the development of the mass market, fashionable clothes became a means by which individuals could express themselves and construct their identity (De la Haye, Amy and Elizabeth Wilson 1). Consequently, we might expect Dior's designs to have been embraced in the United States. However, according to *Life's* coverage of the trend, the reaction of American

women to the New Look was far from unquestioned enthusiasm for the vision of the Parisian couturier.

The nostalgia for a world of clearly defined gender roles that was to rouse American women's interest in the New Look did not in fact play as large a role as the proponents of the new trend assumed. Although its elegance and glamour appealed to 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue, the New Look was met with suspicion, renegotiation, and sometimes even the outrage of ordinary Americans. As *Life* demonstrated, on Main Street the style was transformed, appropriated, and ultimately popularized.

The articles in the fashion section of *Life* frequently mentioned the unfavorable reaction of American women to the New Look. One of them described their response: "rebellious or frantic or both" (The New Look for Old Clothes 109), and enumerated various protests against the new trend: "parades of protest in Texas, picket lines in California and husbands organizing [themselves] in Georgia." In the same article, American women were described as "distraught" because of the changes in fashion. In another, they were even reported to be "readily combustible" (The New Look for 100\$ 83). The magazine reported on about "the Little Below the Knee Club, a nationwide organization of some 30,000 embattled women," established to protest against the Look (I Know Women Well 85). Women were presented in pictures parading with banners beseeching "PLEASE SAVE US!!" *Life* wrote about "the national furor" that was provoked by women all over the U.S., who felt that "they have been outrageously imposed on by [the] mysterious 'they' who dictate fashion" (*Life* Presents a Review of Fall Fashions 115-125). The magazine went on to mention, "The sudden, shrill cry that went up when women first saw the new look" that "testifies to the jittery existence of the fashion-follower." In an even harsher commentary *Life* wrote: "To the average U.S. woman this fall's sharp change in fashion represents a real crisis, a challenge to her pride, and her innate sense of independence" (125).

As historians of American culture have demonstrated, in the early postwar years the New Look indeed provoked indignation. Parades and demonstrations were mounted against the new style. Resolutions condemning the style were introduced in the legislatures of several Midwestern states (Davis 93). However, *Life's* presentation of the reactions to the new trend perpetuated the old myths and illusions about "old" Europe and "New World" (Kroes 43-44). The magazine depicted rebellious, independent, and practical American women protesting against a trend that evoked social hierarchy and an aristocratic style. As we shall see, contrasting "Parisian extravagance" with "American simplicity," *Life* played a significant role in the perpetuation of the old myths about American and European cultures in the context of the Cold War rivalry for cultural dominance.

American women's reluctant response to the New Look can be ascribed to a number of factors. Firstly, there was economics. "Long skirts also have a deeper significance—they usually precede a depression" (Spring Suits 84)—wrote *Life*, suggesting one of the causes of the anti-fashion outrage. The new trend might therefore conjured up the memories of the Great Depression, when women's skirts had lengthened in comparison with the flappers' dresses popular during the prosperity of the 1920s (Conor). In the initial postwar years, the New Look was condemned as "a shameful indulgence in the face of economic recession" (Beward 192). Many people perceived it as a threat to the post-war economy (Hollows 150). *Life* labeled it "a fashion euphemism which skyrockets large accounts" (Waist Pinchers 47). Hence, the new design was closely associated with excessive and unnecessary monetary expenditure. To keep up with the trend invented by the decadent and extravagant Parisian, American women would have been forced to considerably enlarge their clothing budget.

According to *Life*, another reason for the opposition of American women the new fashion was their pride and "innate sense of independence." In October 1947 the magazine wrote about "grumbling" in the United States that was inspired by the French who "supposedly invented" the New Look (Model Loses New Look 44). Dior's designs were treated as a symbolic threat to women's freedom and autonomy (Hollows 150). Moreover, it was perceived as being imposed. Even more importantly, it was seen as something inflicted not from within (as an indigenous American element of culture) but from abroad—that is, from France. In short, it was not American. It was foreign.

Dior's extravagant style was in many instances in direct opposition to the "American look," a phrase coined by *Life* in order to contrast with the New Look (What is an American Look 87-91). The magazine, posing the question about an "American look" at the heyday of Dior's influence, juxtaposed a vision of Parisian glamour and lavishness with one of American simplicity and naturalness. The American version of femininity meant freshness, agelessness, poise, friendliness, animation, and enthusiasm. The American figure was long-legged, broad-shouldered, slim-waisted, and high-bosomed. The look was nourished "by the economic riches of the country . . . the land of milk, green vegetables and orange juice" and young girls' participation in competitive sports. An important component of the American version of femininity was the maternal role of the woman, who prided herself on her home and children.

"The American look" differed significantly from the vision offered by the Parisian designer. The latter style, as depicted by *Life*, was artificial and exaggerated. Its characteristic traits and accessories were sumptuous make-up,

figure-shaping corsets, high heels, and abundant and large jewelry such as rings and earrings (The French Look 91). American women—naturally full-hipped-and-bosomed—did not have to make use of mendacious Gallic apparel of femininity such as the corset. The American figure was naturally shaped like an hourglass but with broader shoulders and longer legs that embellished it with an element of healthiness. According to the magazine, the naturalness of the physical appearance was entirely in keeping with the spontaneity and friendliness of the character of American women. Its only association with the New Look was the emphasis put on motherhood and domesticity (Hollows 150; Lake 360-362). According to *Life's* account, the superficial femininity of the New Look seemed artificial and unattractive in comparison with the natural womanliness of the American woman.

In the pages of *Life*, the “natural look” of American women was contrasted with the supposed artificiality of the French trend. The former epitomized American modernity and simplicity AND the latter, the “old” culture of Europe. For *Life*, “the American look” and “the New Look” symbolized the respective sets of values and dominant qualities of the American and European ways of life. In line with the prevailing ideology, America embodied naturalness, freshness, and spontaneity. In contrast, France and French culture—quintessentially European—were presented as artificial, hierarchical, and insincere.

Dior's designs were also criticized by the American designer Adrian, named by *Life* as “one of its staunch opponents” (*Life Presents a Review of Fall Fashions* 123). He is quoted by the magazine as saying: “American women's clothes should be streamlined in the daytime, full of imagination at night. I do *not* like padded hips. To try to make women pad their hips is a little like selling armor to the American man” (*Whirling Dresses* 87) (emphasis original). Adrian's vision of the American look was compatible with that portrayed by *Life*—natural, simple, and practical. His opposition to the French style (exemplified by one of its most visible and controversial attributes: the padded hips) may be included in the array of voices identifying the New Look as an artificial imposition from abroad. The comparison of padded hips to armor can be seen as an allusion to the discomfort caused by both. Moreover, armor may be linked to Europeaness, as it is an attribute of knighthood, a concept associated by Americans with the Old Continent. To state that American men do not need armor is to emphasize their bravery and readiness for combat. To use such a comparison is also to say that American women do not need padded hips to emphasize their femininity. They are naturally full-hipped and resourceful, ready for motherhood and do not need the uncomfortable and artificial accessories that underline feminine qualities in

French women. Again, the contrast between the American and French style made by Adrian was designed to evoke the cultural differences between “natural” and “old” America and “old” and “artificial” Europe, struggling for hegemony in the postwar cultural reality.

Opposition to the New Look might also have derived from visual and material associations with a bygone era. Defined by one scholar as “a sartorial attempt to turn back the clock,” (Wilson 2005:12), the French style’s abundant use of corsets, padding, and lace resulted in its association with the Victorian age. The corset—an attribute of Victorian femininity rejected by the Jazz Age flapper—was being brought back by the Parisian couturier. *Life* wrote: “So the corset is back and stylish America women are going to be asked to submit, at varying prices, to the pads and tight lacing of their Victorian grandmothers.” Corsets, as *Life* stated, “will slim unruly waists as slim as three inches if,” as one stylist remarked, “you can stand the pressure” (Waist Pinchers 47). Consequently, corsets and lace were associated with Victorian times due to the physical discomfort involved and rigorous bodily discipline. They evoked artificiality and theatricality. They could hardly expect to meet with a warm welcome after decades of loose, unrestricting clothes. Significantly, they could not go hand in hand with purported American naturalness and healthiness promulgated in the pages of *Life*.

Moreover, in light of the ideological construction of American egalitarianism and classlessness, the New Look was a striking reassertion of earlier hierarchical ideas from the nineteenth century. For ordinary people, it was a reminder of social divisions (Arnold 4). According to Rebecca Arnold, “The New Look sought to reaffirm the exclusivity of the couture salon, the luxury of the few, who had no need to worry about such practicalities as cost or availability of fabric” (6). Hence, New Look’s luxuriousness, extravagance, and impracticality were in stark contrast to the prevailing economic conditions experienced by the American people in the postwar period. It also directly contradicted one of the foremost elements of America’s ideology—egalitarianism and distaste for class distinctions in society.

*Life*’s coverage of the New Look and the American designs of that time bring to mind the ideological constructions of America and Europe. The magazine’s depiction of the French fashion (that embodied all the qualities of the “Old” Continent) evoked social divisions, hierarchy, and artificiality, epitomized by the corset. The “new” world—America—was in its view ideologically classless, egalitarian, natural, and modern. *Life*—with its high circulation and immense influence on the American public—was the ideal medium to perpetuate these myths, pertinent in such a time of rivalry for cultural hegemony between Europe and the United States (Guilbaut).

In his book: *Fashion, Culture, and Identity*, Fred David states that ultimately the French style “came in time to be widely accepted, despite the aesthetic and moral distress it gave rise to initially” (93). Due to some strategic changes, presented on the pages of *Life*, the New Look lost its controversial edge, was popularized and assimilated into “all layers of fashionable dress” (Arnold 7).

The articles published in *Life* proposed some steps that might lessen the financial burden of the wardrobe change. In two articles from 1947, the magazine showed how to comply with the Parisian look without being left with an empty wallet. One strategy was to tailor old-fashioned outfits in line with the new style. It might have been done by “wringing the new from the old,” adding a long lace overskirt to look like crinoline (associated with the Victorian-like New Look), tightening the waist with a velvet band (which made the figure in the required shape of hourglass), cutting the neckline and exposing the shoulders (The New Look for Old Clothes 109). In the same article, *Life* explained how to re-sew an old suit (by transferring the pads from shoulders to hips) and to adopt an unfashionable dinner dress (by cutting the top off or adding crinoline padding on the hips) (The New Look for Old Clothes 110-112).

\$100 was, for *Life*, an acceptable sum to be spent on clothes purchases to keep up with the new trend (in fact, the sum constituted more than half of the average monthly wage; thus, it would be a considerable burden on a family budget). The magazine suggested buying mass-produced copies and blending some items from the “old wardrobe” (such as sweaters, scarves, and suit jackets) with the “new one” (The New Look for 100\$ 83). The transformation of expensive couture items into mass-produced clothes was another telling cultural phenomenon, described by the magazine. Providing as an example “a full-skirted dress named ‘Margrave,’” *Life* described “the gradual percolation of Dior’s New Look down to the popular American dress market” (I Know Women Well 87). The cost of the dress plummeted down from \$400 (with intermediary steps of \$100, \$45, and \$25) to the more accessible price of \$8.95 in only three months. The initial model (made up in American fabric to avoid custom duties) was an extravagant “black wool dress with a narrow top and wide skirt with three large bows down the center of the bosom with provocative areas of bare skin showing between the bows” (I Know Women Well 88). It was gradually simplified by almost 6 yards to a narrower item with a zipper instead of buttons, made of rayon in place of wool, and the “bare flesh eliminated in favor of a conventional, covered-up front, with the bows superimposed onto the bodice” (I Know Women Well 89). Commenting upon the transformation, *Life* once again recalled the social differences between Europe and the United States. The French model of

the dress (extravagant and with a lot of “bare flesh”) was suitable for the higher social brackets, “willing to expose the bosom.” The French dress, as *Life* seemed to suggest, was appropriate for Gallic upper classes. The American one was created due to the difference in the standard of respectability of the middle classes, who were more decent and stringent (*I Know Women Well* 89). This time, the French aristocracy and extravagance was contrasted with American prudence and aversion to social hierarchy. And Americanness was identified as a specifically middle-class phenomenon.

*Life's* suggestions of how to pursue the new trend without ruining one's budget put an emphasis on practicality, thrift, and creativity. Reacting to the initial uproar over the introduction of the new style, the magazine advised women on how to transform their clothes. Its proposals were a reflection of the predominant American feelings and emotions, the recollections and memories of the war and the economic constraints as well as the fears and uncertainty of the first postwar years. The response of the American dress market and its adaptation of French design to American conditions also made the new trend more acceptable. Moreover, *Life* did not include in its suggestions the most controversial element of the New Look design: the corset. Thus, the magazine distanced itself from the connotations of aristocracy and social divisions that the style carried. The alterations proposed by *Life* allowed every woman to include some elements of the New Look in her wardrobe. In short, it popularized it.

*Life* correctly forecasted that it would take a few years for American women to become accustomed to this new fashion imported from France. Indeed, in the period after the war, the memories of rationing, fabric shortages, and making ends meet were still fresh. At the beginning of the 1950s, with the return of economic stability, the New Look's extravagance, adapted to American reality, ceased to provoke controversy. The leading role of the United States in postwar culture contributed to the acceptance of the French style. The New Look hourglass figure became compatible with the new vision of femininity with its emphasis on women's biological functions. The transformation, simplification, and general acceptance of the French style by the middle strata of American society liberated it from former connotations of Parisian decadence and exclusivity. In the decade of the 1950s, being worn by so many, the New Look lost its elitist aura. It was appropriated, transformed, and incorporated into popular fashion (Gilbert 17).

To conclude, the case of *Life's* coverage of the New Look seems to reveal a broader cultural process: media-driven opposition to an extravagant and glamorous couture, presented as being incompatible with patriotism and thrift so

important in the years after the war. In its coverage of the style, *Life* contrasted “the artificial New Look” with “the natural and simple American look.” In a time of American and European rivalry for cultural hegemony, the magazine dredged up erstwhile myths and stereotypes of the “old” and “new” continents. Modernity, simplicity, and naturalness embodied in the American outfit, were juxtaposed with European artificiality and extravagance symbolized by the New Look. In the context of Cold War trans-Atlantic competition, the popular “outrage,” as presented by the mainstream media, was “enriched” with a very particular set of home-grown values: a “sense of independence,” “pride,” a reluctance to acknowledge social divisions, resistance to impracticality, and purported naturalness. The opposition to the New Look was presented as a rebellion in favor of independence launched by a classless and modern America against the class-ridden countries of “old” Europe. The popularization and adaptation of the style, as depicted and encouraged by the magazine, were also in line with the American ideology of practicality and simplicity. The coverage of the New Look by *Life* peaked in 1947—the year of the formulation of the Truman doctrine. The Soviet Union—the former wartime ally—became the Cold War adversary. And the values exemplified by “the American look” paralleled those that America was touting in its conflict with the Soviet Union in the Cold War period.

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