

Fashion, Style and Identity in 1980s New York: Examining Street Photography

Collections by Amy Arbus and Jamel Shabazz.

50 word summary:

This thesis explores fashion, style and identity in 1980s New York City through an exploration of street photography collections by Amy Arbus and Jamel Shabazz. *On The Street* (2006) depicts the postmodern fashion-conscious individual who used dress to communicate their identities and style narratives, subverting fashion's hierarchies. *Back in the Days* (2001) highlights the significance of fashion to hip-hop culture, exploring how individuals navigated social status, identity, race and class through their pose, walk, talk and dress.

Additional text:

I aim to interrogate photography and its genres, using photographs as documents and investigating the relationship between images, their producers and their subjects, specifically how these images can simultaneously be read as dimensions of fashion and documentary photography.

AMY ARBUS

Emphasising the heterogeneous nature of fashion in postmodern times, they argue that fashion is more unpredictable and ambiguous than before, as a plethora of alternative ways of dressing and using dress to communicate ideas or personal statements became recognised. In true postmodern form, the former strict hierarchical nature of fashion in which the fashion industry dictated new trends, which changed each season what was deemed fashionable was dismantled. (Page 22.)

Moreover, it is important to note that 'ordinary' people in everyday life in a postmodern world also combine and mix clothes and symbols, acting as bricoleurs in their own ways, like in Figure 11 (FIGURE 11 IS THE IMAGE OF THE WOMAN IN BRITISH FLAG SKIRT). The woman's outfit is postmodern; it is ambiguous and unpredictable at once and exhibits a bricoleur at work, as she

places a highly valued symbol of Britishness in new contexts, on the street in another country and as a piece of clothing.

On The Street is an early example of columns that have now been widely disseminated into the mainstream fashion press that focus on the style of the 'everyday' people walking the streets of fashion capitals such as New York. However, as argued in the chapter, these people are not ordinary. The people Arbus captured are fashion conscious individuals that use their clothing to express their identities and personal style narratives. They embrace the postmodern attitudes that arose in the 1980s, acting as bricoleurs, challenging fashion's archaic hierarchies in a time when fashion began to bubble up, originating on the street as well as trickling down.

JAMEL SHABAZZ

Back in the Days by Jamel Shabazz, a body of work that captures black and Latino neighbourhoods of New York City in the 1980s. Renowned for its embodiment of early hip-hop culture, the photographs are demonstrative of the crucial role fashion played within the culture and how fashion is an effective tool for communicating social status and identity. Careful combinations of pose, walk, talk, and dress was crucial to these individuals as they navigated systematic issues of race and class within society.

In relation to clothing, individuals developed a talent which, in this case, revolved around fashion sensibilities and style narratives, comparable to a freestyle performance, designed to showcase an individual's unique abilities. Acquiring such a skill set relied on one's street fashion knowledge, individual taste levels (Romero, 2012), and individual style narratives (Tulloch, 2010) and thus used this talent express their 'signature style' or identity through their clothing. In essence, urban teenagers worked as skilled stylists who could put together any outfit with ease.

Typically only making one print of the negative and reconnecting with the subject later, Shabazz saw the potential for power his photography could have; as in the endnote of *Back in the Days*, he states how the camera ‘enabled me to tell a person how special and valuable they were and I had hoped that I could encourage people to look toward their own futures and believe in themselves’ (Shabazz, 2001). His practice allowed his subjects to explore the potential for agency that photography can provide, using their bodies and presentation to direct the power within the moments captured by Shabazz.