# Hedi Slimane & the reinvention of menswear

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## Abstract

This article analyzes the role of designer Hedi Slimane in shaping the development of menswear in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Slimane's collections for Dior Homme in the early 2000s caught the imagination of the fashion press with their combination of a radically slim silhouette, precise tailoring and androgynous flourishes. Along with the commercial success he brought to Dior, Slimane catalyzed a renewed interest in menswear, the aesthetic he proposed acting as a prototype for men's fashion throughout the decade. By contrasting Slimane's slender, ambiguous and self-consciously elegant look with the sporty muscularity of the 1990s catwalk, the article explores the shifting nature of male identity in the new millennium as fashionable men found new ways of consuming their masculinity.

Keywords: masculinity, menswear, Hedi Slimane, slim silhouette, androgyny,

## Foreword

In 2001 I spent six months in Paris working in a health-food shop and living in a small, un-plumbed bedsit in the eaves of a nineteenth century apartment block. I was ecstatically happy: Paris seemed to be a city alive with possibility, and I spent hours wandering the Marais, Saint-Germain-des-Prés, around the Beaubourg and the – then slightly edgy – area of Oberkampf and Canal St Martin where many French designers had their studios. The nascent changes to menswear of the late 1990s and early 2000s had not entirely eluded me, an avid consumer *of Dazed and Confused* and *Sleaze Nation*. But it was in that year that I noticed that people's responses to me changed: my stringy form and androgynous appearance had suddenly come into fashion. A photographer at the *École des Beaux Arts* asked to take some pictures of me, I now think, trying to capture some of my youthful uncertainty; it was the look at the time. See image 1.

In this context, the changes to fashion and to representations of masculinity that Hedi Slimane introduced in the early 2000s, had a particularly strong and positive impact on me. The dominant models of masculinity of the 1990s had seemed unobtainable – I was never going to ripple with muscles or achieve a deep tan – nor did the mainstream gay scene of the late 1990s contest this model, as much in thrall to hegemonic masculinity as the straight world. Rather, the smallish indie scene represented by nights like *Trash* – with more than its fair share of queer youth – offered a true alternative in which more diverse modes of masculinity could be explored. As I will go on to suggest, in some ways indie subculture in the 1990s acted as the progenitor or at least as the guardian of the elements of Slimane's style, for which the 1970s 'underground' remained a particularly important reference.

At art school between 2002 and 2006, I saw myself as part of the vanguard of this new menswear, to which many of our lecturers were highly ambivalent. This was the period in which Shoreditch and Brick Lane were becoming increasingly well known, as a new scene of dressed-up dandyism emerged amongst an arty crowd of clubbers, musicians, interns, and struggling designers. Nights like *Anti-Social* and *Boombox* in Shoreditch as well as music venues including the *George Tavern* and the *Rhythm Factory* in Whitechapel became important places to dance, dress-up and be seen. This fashionable East London style was characterized by many of the features, including the very slim silhouette, that Slimane was pioneering at the time.

In 2005 I undertook work-experience for a large casual-wear firm based in Northern Italy, who remained singularly unconvinced that skinny jeans were a trend likely to take off in any big way. I and my student colleagues, immersed to various extents in an arty milieu, saw the company's less than rapturous response to our designs as both provincial, and lacking in foresight: but it was indicative both of the pace and the uncertainty of shifts in menswear at that point. It is important to remember that the fashionable scenes of cities including London, Paris, and Berlin – while influential – were at some remove from the broader culture and even the mainstream fashion industry. See images 2 and 3.

## Introduction

In the following I hope to locate Slimane's intervention in men's fashion and masculinity within a specific historical and disciplinary framework; to establish how and why Slimane's work enjoyed critical and commercial success; and to suggest how this success related to changing models of gender in the early to mid 2000s. My intention is to produce an account bringing together an analysis of fashion both as a creative discipline and as a producer of multiple masculinities. To this end, I have engaged closely with a range of materials, particularly documentation of Hedi Slimane's collections for Dior Homme from 2001 to 2007 and, as far as possible, with his preceding collections for Yves Saint Laurent Rive Gauche.

In the past three decades a rich body of literature has emerged to reveal the links between fashion and broader social and cultural processes (Hebdidge 1979, Wilson 1985, Barnard 1996, McRobbie 1998, Kaiser 2012). Drawing on sociology, psychology, semiotics, structuralist and post-structuralist thought, authors have sought to describe the manner in which fashion reflects the preoccupations of a particular society while acting variously to reproduce or challenge dominant cultural and economic relationships. But though these analyses have done much to provoke more serious and engaged discourses surrounding fashion, they have tended to underplay the significance of fashion as an *authored text* in which the designer – in particular – may consciously employ dress not only to reflect upon but to actively intervene in culture. In the following, I hope to demonstrate how Hedi Slimane's innovations in men's fashion during the 2000s were designed to disrupt dominant representations of fashionable masculinity while assessing the reach, success and potential limitations of his approach.

As I have described, my own experience of this new model of masculinity pioneered by Hedi Slimane – was one of some emotional and creative investment. And while I

am no longer so directly engaged in fashion design practice, nor to the same extent in the 'construction' of my identity, it would clearly be disingenuous to attempt to absent myself and my subjectivity from this analysis. I hope that my experiences of men's fashion, subculture and design inform my account, at the same time as maintaining an awareness of the specificity of my subject position, and the possibility of other interpretations. As writers and thinkers from both feminist and queer theory perspectives have described, personal experience is often a useful point of departure from which to consider broader questions of culture, society and politics, not as an avoidance of a rigorous or theoretically informed analysis, but rather as a way of accounting for the complexity and specificity of experiences that may not fit into existing accounts and orthodox models (Hanisch 1970). See image 4.

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> Seductive style to take your breath away, the like of which the world of menswear has rarely dared to imagine. (Cabasset 2001: 70)

From the middle of the 1990s to the end of that decade, scholarship focused upon masculinity and fashion enjoyed a sudden, and ostensibly unexpected, flowering. A range of new texts from a variety of perspectives explored the ways in which men constructed their identities through an interaction with fashion and consumer culture, for example: *The Hidden Consumer*, Christopher Breward (1999) *Men in The Mirror*, Tim Edwards (1997) *Hard looks*, Sean Nixon (1996) and *Cultures of Consumption*, Frank Mort (1996). These studies broke new ground in the analysis of an area that had been historically marginalized, and indeed, the foundational work of these authors have been crucial references in establishing the parameters of this article. While this is not the forum to rehearse this set of discourses in detail it would be fair to characterize Nixon, Edwards and Mort as suggesting that the emergence of a more sophisticated market in men's fashion – along with the lifestyle journalism, advertising and photography which surrounded it – had opened up sites for a newly commodified performance of masculinity. Indeed, in a chapter entitled *New Men and New Markets* Frank Mort (1996: 15-27) explicitly links economic change in the 1980s, new models of masculinity associated more with consumption than production, and the development of a new menswear market. Somewhat divergently, Christopher Breward's *The Hidden Consumer* (1999) with its focus on men's fashion of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, sought to locate menswear consumption in these periods as a locus of spectacular display linked to an emergent consumer culture. But despite the apparent divergent nature of Breward's writing in terms of its historical scope, all of these studies seem to point towards a scholarly engagement in men's fashion reaching a point of amplification in the final years of the twentieth-century.

It is intriguing and paradoxical, nevertheless, that this wealth of academic work engaging in men's fashion took place at a time when menswear as a design practice was anything but fecund. The late 1990s was a period in which arid and lifeless ideas were recycled on a seemingly endless loop: unstructured tailoring, workwear, sportswear, with the occasional bare muscled torso to add some semblance of vivacity. While, of course, some original and creative practitioners did prevail in this singularly inhospitable environment – Raf Simons, Helmut Lang, and Tom Ford at

Gucci spring to mind – there was a strong feeling amongst those engaged in men's fashion, strangely anticipated by the scholarly works to which I have alluded, that change in menswear had to come. To this end Adrian Clark (1999a) of *The Guardian* asked: 'Does menswear really have to be so boring? What it has lacked for over a decade, is some drive, some guts and a wider choice.'

At the turn of the millennium a feeling pervaded the press, industry and academy that the representation of a greater diversity of masculinities had to be possible through the medium of menswear. Hedi Slimane, designer for Yves Saint Laurent Rive Gauche from 1997 to 2000, was cited as an increasingly important influence by those in the know during the late 1990s, combining a new radically slim silhouette with precise tailoring and 'edgy' play with form and fabrication [1]. But it was Slimane's 2001 launch of a new label *Dior Homme* that acted as his decisive critical intervention in menswear, pointing towards the formal and aesthetic approaches that would go on to characterize the practice of men's fashion in the coming decade. The claims made for Slimane at the time evoked messianic imagery: 'It was on the last day of the presentations, however, that Paris was saved, by Hedi Slimane' (Clark 1999b). With the eyes of the world upon him, Slimane proposed a vision of menswear that seemed, at that moment, entirely new, fresh and exhilarating. In the words of Charlie Porter in *The Guardian:*

> Nothing exciting is meant to happen in men's fashion. Yet in Paris right now, the talk is all of Hedi Slimane, the designer whose work at the newly established Dior Homme is provoking a radical rethink in the stagnating ateliers of menswear. (Porter 2001)

In Slimane's inaugural collection for Dior, and in his final collection for Yves Saint Laurent, some of the core semantic and formal elements that went on to define his practice in the 2000s are already observable. Firstly, there is a renewed emphasis on tailoring, as evidenced in Richard Avedon's iconic campaign photograph of Eric Van Nostrand for Autumn/Winter 2001/2002, in which the jacket has simultaneously regained its structured form – darted through the waist and padded and rolled at the shoulder – while losing the carapace-like excess of canvas that frequently characterizes traditional tailoring. The prioritisation of elements of formal and evening wear, though the pieces were rarely worn as conventional suits, reflects a dandyish, nostalgic aspect to many of Slimane's collections. This should be read as a reaction to the dominance of sportswear in the 1990s, and to the oversized structureless silhouette introduced by Armani – both of which, ironically, rendered the hyper-traditionalist elegance of men's evening wear a subversive pose. Lest the implicit subversiveness of these two collections be too weakly felt, Slimane introduced an abstracting approach, shearing away at garments to reveal their pure forms. For Yves Saint Laurent Autumn/Winter 2000/2001 shirts were finished without buttons or, more dramatically, were reinterpreted as a bolt of silk suspended from the neck, animated as the model progressed along the catwalk. In this outfit, in particular, a knowledge and respect for the core sartorial forms of menswear is joined by a willingness to challenge and radically subvert them. Moreover, the bared skin and more especially the sensuousness of the drape introduced an eroticism to the catwalk that would have been much less strongly felt had the model simply been shirtless. This sense of ambiguous eroticism was also seen in Slimane's contrast of monochrome against deep necklines and sheer fabrics, creating a graphic

juxtaposition between the white of the models' chests and the black of their garments. Nods to Young Americans era Bowie and Roxy Music – in the form of tipped fedoras, leather and gold lamé trousers – appeared throughout the collection, but the exuberance of these gestures was always balanced against the coolness and minimalism of the styling. Similarly, in Solitaire for Dior Homme Autumn/Winter 2001/2002, the cleanness of the stripped back tailoring was complimented by subtle elements of decoration. The fabric corsage attached to the lapel of the tailored jacket in the celebrated Richard Avedon photograph was made using haute couture womenswear techniques for which Dior are well known, but these potentially conflicting elements of precision and decoration were balanced with a measured restraint. The impression we are left with, reflected in the fashion journalism of the time, is both of the audacity of the work, and simultaneously its strong and determined sense of purpose.

## Return to the demi-monde

In his desire to reconfigure and reform menswear Slimane turned to the past, to a period preceding the baggy sportswear inspired styles and glistening musculatures that had dominated the 1990s catwalk. In the advertising campaign for Autumn/Winter 2005, a model lounges in a moodily lit but chic 1970s interior. His black fedora, glossy black-leather trench-coat, drain-pipe trousers and gold Cuban heels evoke a set of overlapping 1970s underground scenes: pre-Berlin Bowie, the New York Dolls, *The Factory*, and early Robert Mapplethorpe. The period in which proto-punk and glam interacted was also the point at which a flirtation with queer signifiers was at its apogee. Drag queens interacted with beat poets; boys and girls wore gold trousers, black leather jackets and bore their chests (O'Brien, Couillerot, Parraud, et al 2005). The iconography of a queer coolness, of aw 'mash-up' collaged approach to butch and femme, soft and hard becomes the visual language of rebellion in the 1970s. It is not by mistake, therefore, that Slimane returns again and again to this milieu paying homage to its images and icons.

In Slimane's Spring 2002 campaign for Dior Homme, again photographed by Richard Avedon the fine, sensuous features of model Tiago Gass are picked out by stark directional lighting: hair brushed dramatically over his face he looks directly into the camera, at once challenging and seductive. The model's shirt – shorn of its sleeves in a quiet nod to punk – is preternaturally crisp, its narrow collar finished with the closest of edge-stiches. A slim black tie bifurcates Gass' torso. But the controlled minimalism of the scene is interrupted by a dramatic stain to the left side of the model's chest, a splotch complete with dark droplets which on closer inspection reveals itself to be a motif of hand-embroidered sequins. The image certainly possesses a cool beauty, but suddenly, looking through Roberta Bayley's photographs of punk pioneers I realise that the advertisement is a direct quote (see image 5). It references a series of pictures of former New York Doll *Johnny Thunders* and his band *The Heartbreakers* whose blood stained shirts evidence a (clearly staged) shot to the heart (Bayley 2005: 96-97). The figure on the centre right of Bayley's image, the obvious prototype for Avedon's 2002 photograph, is the seminal proto-punk *Richard Hell* whose carefully calculated style went on to be highly influential, providing a

bridge between the glamour of the early 1970s and the nihilism that characterized the later part of the decade. The seductive, if not quite effortless cool of New York's 1970s demi-monde is certainly a rich source of inspiration for Slimane, we can see its influence particularly strongly felt in his Autumn-Winter 2005/2006 collection at *Dior Homme*, and already in his Autumn-Winter 2000/2001 collection for Yves Saint Laurent with its early Robert Maplethorpe styling, in Spring-Summer 2007 in a more punkish incarnation, and inflecting various of Slimane's collections with their emphasis on metallics, high sheen leathers and the eroticisation of the chest.

## A new man?

For Slimane, the seventies underground exercised a fascination linked to the ambiguous and provocative model of masculinity embodied by figures like *Richard Hell* (O'Brien, Couillerot, Parraud, et al 2005). However, the power of these subversive references can be more strongly felt when contrasted against the fashionable masculinities which preceded Slimane's intervention in fashion. Dominant media representations of masculinity, from the mid 1980s and throughout the 1990s, privileged archetypes typified by a muscular eroticism inspired by neo-classicism and 2nd World War propaganda of various hues. Workwear and military garments were particularly important references, while a highly muscular gym-honed body was reflected in menswear shoots that that nodded to Greco-Roman statuary, socialist-realist imagery and images of early twentieth Century industrial workers. Models were often shot shirtless, or in underwear, in a manner that combined a frank eroticisation of the male form with the suggestion of a powerful, highly physical and active masculinity. Photographer Bruce Weber's iconic images for Calvin Klein, including his 1982 campaign featuring pole-vaulter Tom Hintnaus, anticipated the tone of the decade, by 1987 his *Obsession For Men* campaign, seemingly channelling Leni Riefenstahl*,* reflected a recognisable archetype of fashionable masculinity. Accompanying this prioritisation of a muscular physique, sportswear, casual wear and elements of workwear increasingly dominated popular men's fashions of the late 1980s, nor was this a passing trend.

Indeed, the continued traction of über-masculine modes of self-presentation is still apparent in the Spring/Summer 1994 edition of Arena Homme+ (See image 6). A story entitled *Military Precision* features models in a variety of rumpled pseudo-utility garments, the editorial adding:

> This year's action man is primarily a creature of the desert, with shades of sand, gunmetal and stone […] Combat trousers are a particular favourite, with chunky thigh pockets […] in which to stash those all-important maps, secret codes and poison pellets. (Anon, Arena Homme+1994: 64)

This reliance upon a highly conservative notion of maleness, celebrating explicitly military imagery perhaps reflects a retrenchment in cultures of masculinity. In a US context, the Culture Wars of the 1980s had seen gender become a highly fraught and polarising issue. In Western Europe the 1980s and1990s saw many of the certainties of the progressive post-war consensus challenged, along with economic uncertainty gender and sexuality were also increasingly contested. But whether primarily as a response to gender-politics, or to economic uncertainty, masculinity of the early late 1980s and 1990s was located as a crisis-ridden space, a notion reflected in the

discourses around the new-man, yuppie and new-lad by writers including Sean Nixon, Tim Edwards, and Frank Mort.

Tim Edwards in his text of 1997 *Men in the Mirror* eloquently evokes the ambivalence and contradiction that underpinned the figure of the new-man, whom he describes as having emerged from 'the crystallization of consequences in economics, marketing, political ideology, demography and, most widely consumer society in the 1980s' (1997:39-40). As Edwards recounts, the new-man occupied an ambiguous position: located in media discourses both in relation to second-wave feminism and to an increasingly acquisitive model of capitalism: overtly commercialized and sexualized, while simultaneously reliant upon a curiously conventional image of masculinity. Despite the associations of the new-man with contestation and change, Edwards suggests, the explosion of new-man imagery in the 1980s was strangely safe and repetitive:

> Yet despite this apparent plethora, the content of these representations remains quite extraordinarily fixed. The men in question are always young, usually white, particularly muscular, critically strong jawed, clean shaven (often all over), healthy, sporty, successful, virile and ultimately sexy. (Edwards 1997: 41)

He goes on to characterize fashionable masculinity of the period as centred around the dominant archetypes of the expensively suited businessman and of the sporty, often scantily clad '*outdoor casual'*. So while the imagery of the new-man of the 1980s emphasized fashionable consumption, grooming, and desirability, it did so in a manner, as we have seen, that reinforced existing dominant modes masculinity privileging the physical strength of the athlete and the economic prowess of the businessman.

In this sense, fashions of this period reflect anxieties pervading the performance of masculinity within a still strongly heterosexist society experiencing rapid social change. The eroticisation of the male body – which took place to an increasing extent in the late 1980s and 1990s – used hyper-masculinity as a way of displacing the unease which went along with the objectification of the male body. In this way, advertisers, designers and image-makers had their cake and ate it: giving themselves the permission to commodify male bodies, while employing the symbols of male power to neutralize the subversiveness of the act:

> In effect the bodybuilder was the fleshy representation of the New Right's regressive revolution: in tune with developments of popular culture but deploying them for a right wing agenda. (Simpson 1994a: 24)

For Nixon, Edwards and Mort the increased commodification of the male body and incitement to the homospectatorial gaze (Fuss 1992) are linked to the figure of the new-man, as male consumers are exposed to increasingly diverse ways of 'consuming their masculinities.'[2] However, the notion of the new-man, with its progressive connotations, sits uneasily with images which, as I have described, present a somewhat antediluvian model of masculinity. Indeed, writers such as Mark Simpson and Niall Richardson (2010: 37-38) draw attention to the relationship between bodybuilding and the rightward shift in American politics of the 1980s and early 1990s, particularly as manifested in homophobia and in the fear of effeminacy. In this

way, the aesthetic nature and semantic content of these commodified and eroticized images are not coincidental, but point to the ambivalence and anxieties that surrounded the commodification of masculinity in the 1980s and 1990s and which, in the context of resurgent right-wing economic and social politics, relied on distinctly conservative masculine iconographies.

## Beyond the homospectorial gaze

The centrality of gay identities to the recent history of men's fashion is one that until very recently was elided and ignored. Shaun Cole has undertaken valuable work in revealing the significance of gay men as innovators of twentieth century menswear introducing styles which came to be associated with Teddy Boys and Mods. As he explains, the first menswear shop on Carnaby Street in the early 60s, catered at first to a predominantly gay clientele:

> [It is] clear that the dress choices of gay men were influential on mainstream men's fashion: 'Vince sold clothes that once would have been worn by no one but queers and extremely blatant ones at that.' (Cohn, 1971 cited in Cole, 2000: 74)

Similarly, Frank Mort (1996: 16) makes a case for early gay lifestyle magazines in the late 1960s, post decriminalisation, as having acted as precursors for later mainstream men's publishing. But I would argue that the figure of the gay man has occupied a more central role at the level of symbol in men's fashion, style, and in fashionable images of men than is widely acknowledged.

Central to the subversiveness of Mod, Carnaby Street, and later Glam and New Romantic/Blitz Kid styles, for both gay and straight participants, was their flirtation with queer signifiers. Something we see reflected explicitly in Slimane's preoccupation with historical and contemporary subculture. The symbolic power of transgressing acceptable heterosexual dress remained both a site of anxiety for purveyors of 'mainstream' men's fashion and a source of fascination and excitement for subcultures. In this sense, fashionable images of men from the 1960s onwards have often operated as the site of negotiated, complex and contested masculinities in which the spectre and augur of homosexuality have been an important part of the mix.

In *Hard looks* Sean Nixon (1996: 180-185) explores how influential style-magazine *The Face* explored a range of what he terms 'hard' and 'soft' signifiers in shoots styled by Ray Petri. My own research has brought me to similar conclusions. For example, in the October 1985 edition of *The Face* (Petri, Morgan 1985: 66-71) Petri's styling features a range of disparate but iconic masculine signifiers: military and naval accessories, workwear, sportswear, flags, and the hard musculature of the models. Against these masculine cues, elements of eclectic 'ethnic' and specifically Native American decorative elements serve to add a complexity to the images that elevates them from mere Tom of Finland camp. As Nixon puts it: 'the choice of model and some of the elements of clothing … have a strong intertextuality with certain traditions of representation of masculinity aimed at and taken up by gay men' (1996b: 185). But to what end are these references to gay strategies of self-presentation employed? I would argue that the implicit aim of Petri's quotation of gay masculinities is more significant than a semi-coded nod to knowing viewers.

Crucially, the creative intention of Petri and *The Face was* to produce innovative images imbued with an exotic, ambiguous and subversive energy.

For fashion designer Jean Paul Gaultier, the 'queering' of hegemonic models of masculinity through the application of camp was a key aspect of his aesthetic. His 1984 collection *L'Homme Objet* applied irony to normative masculinity through the application of gay clichés with muscle-bound models in cropped and backless T-shirts and miscellaneous naval accessories. In a more sophisticated mode, a famous publicity image from his Autumn/Winter 1985 collection (Figure 15) shows a muscular black model, coded masculine by his developed physique, beard and shaven-head, wearing a full quilted satin skirt which he ruches in a clenched fist. Gaultier, like Petri, adopts elements of camp to expose the inherent performance of gender. But while his designs problematize hegemonic masculinity, they also reinforce the dominance of the 'virile' muscular, male figure as a locus of desire and identification. For both Petri and Gaultier, masculine, clone-like modes of self-presentation originating in the 1970s were still strongly felt. And while this look is ironized and aestheticized – in the mid 1980s at a time of homophobic media hysteria in the UK and a worsening AIDS crisis – the representation of a queer identity embodied through physical strength and resilience had particular resonance.

In contrast, Hedi Slimane's designs for Yves Saint Laurent and from 2001 for Dior Homme are neither ironic in intention, nor do they celebrate masculinity as conventionally conceived. Moreover, while Slimane frequently quotes from subcultural scenes which feature elements of camp, his own designs maintain a certain restraint and seriousness, that resist the label camp. This seriousness can be heard in Slimane's interview with Patrick Cabasset for L'Officiel:

> A men's collection can be creative, desirable, enlivened […] Menswear can become fashion too. I don't think this should be forbidden for men. I'm looking for a way through. I want to create something with a closeness, a sense of intimacy, a directness. (2001: 70)

Mark Simpson in his book *Male Impersonators* explains the issue of homophobia by evoking the fundamental fragility of masculinity: 'the problem of de-segregating homosexuality from a private ghetto into a heterosexual world that depends on homosexuality remaining invisible, encapsulates the problem faced everywhere in popular culture today by this frail phenomenon we call masculinity.' (1994b: 6) Yet more strongly, from a psycho-social perspective, David Plummer makes the case for homophobia operating as a structuring agent in masculinity: 'In men's spheres, the yardstick for what is acceptable is hegemonic masculinity and what is unacceptable is marked by homophobia and enforced by homophobia' (1999: 289). The 'queering' strategies of Jean Paul Gaultier find their echoes in Simpson's writing which seeks to expose the performed or 'impersonated' nature of masculinity. However, by the approach of the millennium, there was a sense in which strategies of this sort were beginning to exhaust their usefulness. Homophobia which had acted as a structuring agent for hegemonic masculinity, while providing much of the sense of transgression and taboo for subcultural masculinities, had by the late 1990s ceased to be such a dominant force. In this context, Hedi Slimane made his intervention not only in men's fashion, but also in the symbolic language of masculinity.

> There is a psychology to the masculine: we're told don't touch it; it's ritual, sacred, taboo. It's difficult but I'm making headway, I'm trying to find a new approach. (Slimane, 2001 cited by Cabasset, 2001: 70)

Slimane's collections for Dior Homme, as we have seen, acted as an explicit challenge to dominant representations of masculinity. But it was an intervention not content to sit at the peripheries of visual culture. Hedi Slimane may have drawn his inspiration, substantially, from niche and subcultural art and music scenes but *Maison Christian Dior* a multi-million euro company and one of the world's most famous fashion brands was certainly not subcultural. To send explicitly androgynous figures down a menswear catwalk was not in 2001 totally without precedent[3], but to do so with the backing of a goliath company, with the eyes of the world upon him, and with an equally unequivocal advertising campaign was indeed radical.

## A transformation of menswear

The photographs in figure 7 are separated by almost exactly ten years from those in figure 8 and 9: Here, the changes wrought by Hedi Slimane on Christian Dior's menswear offering are overtly apparent. The boxy plaid jacket of autumn 1997 – three buttoned, broad lapelled, with a high break-point – has been replaced in spring 2007 by a draped, tropical-weight wool jacket, narrow peaked lapel, low break-point, tying – peignoir like – just below the waist. The model's vivid orange shirt of 1997, has been reworked in fine white poplin, and elsewhere replaced by translucent gossamer-like T-shirts with asymmetric draped appendages and geometric cut-outs. Sage-green corduroy trousers are superseded by fitted leather jeans, while a cool palette of reflective greys, tints of sand, and glossy black take over from a rural theme of terracotta, sage, textured browns, charcoal and blues. While Dior Monsieur imagines his man wandering through the countryside, Dior Homme evokes an urban milieu with eveningwear references – sequins, bare chests and shoulders and plays on 'le smoking' – contrasted against military styling in cotton twill and black nappa. See images 7, 8, & 9.

It is hard to understand at whom exactly the 1997 offering of Christian Dior Monsieur is aimed. In a collection undistinguished by any original design features, one wonders why a customer would not prefer to patronize a traditional men's outfitters. But in Slimane's own words 'At the end of the day, the men running the companies wanted the clothes to look like the kind of clothes they would wear, and they didn't really see a world beyond that' (Slimane, 2001 cited in Porter, 2001). As for Dior, so for much of the men's market whose CEOs, removed from their target audience by age, class and social aspiration, frequently projected their own conservatism onto menswear as a whole. Slimane's creation of Dior Homme was of considerable commercial significance to Christian Dior, as chairman Bernard Arnault pointed out in 2007: 'Dior Homme experienced sustained growth across its entire product line (city, sportswear, and accessories).' But a much broader significance of Slimane's success was in innovating menswear more generally, as fashion companies saw a market ripe for capitalization.

In the early 2000s Slimane's influence began to exert itself strongly amongst designer and middle-market brands who adopted much slimmer silhouettes and focused

increasingly on tailoring. In spring 2003 Arena Homme+ featured slim tailoring from Italian label Iceberg: a brand previously strongly associated with oversized casual-wear and knit. By spring 2005, an advertisement for Calvin Klein unexpectedly presented a model in a fitted two-tone suit, replacing the muscular topless men the brand had focused upon in preceding years. Slimane's former protégé Lucas Ossendrijver was appointed head of Lanvin's men's line in 2006 to revitalize their faded menswear offering. While high street companies especially Topman, but also brands including H&M, River Island and Zara, begin to feature styles heavily influenced by Slimane. Between 2007 and 2010 dandyish tailoring, scoop-necked fine gauge T-shirts, and very slim trousers became almost ubiquitous on the high street. Style-blogs attest to the enthusiastic take-up of this style particularly among a demographic in their early 20s. It is arguable that Slimane's strongest influence was felt after he had left Dior Homme in 2007 as his silhouette, punkish influences, androgyny, and emphasis on tailoring began, to infuse popular culture.

Integral to the new slim silhouette which Slimane pioneered were the models he cast for his catwalk shows and advertising campaigns. In the Autumn/Winter 2001 edition of *Arena Homme+* an article entitled 'Adam's ribs' asked:

> Who puts the slim into Slimane's shows? It's a transformation to confound Darwin […] the male model has transformed into a much sleeker animal. Gone are the grinning, pumped-up, all-American-types that dominated the Eighties […] In their place we have the less burly, more surly European skinny-boy. (Healy 2001: 163)

Slimane understood this new physique as representing a more authentic and less overtly constructed masculinity.[4]: 'do real exercise, such as swimming or martial arts. Stay and be as natural as possible. Lean doesn't mean vulnerability but strength' (Slimane, 2001 cited by Healy, 2001: 163) it is equally clear that he saw his choice of model as a deliberate intervention in the language of gender: here cited by Charlie Porter (2001) in an article entitled *Body Politic* for *The Guardian* 'Muscles don't mean masculinity to me […] and long hair does not define your sexuality.'

Raf Simons and Hedi Slimane rejected the 'built' body, a staple of the catwalks throughout the 1990s, in favour of slim, youthful-looking models. It was a strategy which attracted considerable press attention, particularly for Slimane, but which also signified a different set of aspirations for fashionable masculinity in the new millennium. Tellingly, both Simons and Slimane, made explicit borrowings from the Indie music scene and their choices of model – sometimes scouted from clubs and music venues – can be read as an extension of this aesthetic with its connotations of creative integrity and youthful rebellion.

The notion that a slender silhouette represents authenticity is clearly a highly problematic one, failing to account for the bodily regimes required to retain an appearance of perpetual adolescence and at risk of fetishizing youth and vulnerability. The symbolic power of Slimane's choice of models was in repudiating the normative model of masculinity of mainstream fashion imagery, but in doing so he arguably risked replacing one form of body-despotism with another.

Slimane's aesthetic owed much to the influence of mid 1990s Indie subculture typified by the groups of vintage clad teenagers who congregated around Camden-Market and frequented clubs like the *Camden Palace*, *The Scala* in Kings Cross and *Trash*– off Tottenham Court Road. Integral to the sensibility of the scene was the rejection of the commercial values of mainstream fashion and music expressing itself in an adoption of miscellaneous 1970s alternative references, and a tendency towards androgyny. Musicians such as Jarvis Cocker of Pulp and more particularly Brett Anderson of Suede were exemplars of a punk and glam inflected Ziggy-Stardust-manqué aesthetic, which processed through the filter of the 1990s, gained an additional patina of tatty nihilism. The rake-thin silhouette of these frontmen was part of their appeal: dramatically at odds with the pumped-up look of male musicians in commercial pop and mainstream male models.

Echoing a 1970s New York 'vibe' in a CBGBs mode, *The Strokes* emerged in 2000 their Ramones-like look and guitar-oriented sound becoming immensely influential. As Alex Needham, culture editor of The Guardian formerly of *The Face* and *NME* described to me:

> The Strokes were immediately embraced by the fashion world. When you think what The Strokes were wearing at the time – jeans with suit jackets – that pretty much lasted the whole decade, and Converse as well. It was an updated version of a New York punk-band look which goes right back to the Velvet Underground, and that was what the music was like too. (McCauley Bowstead 1 February 2013 interview)

By 2004 Hedi Slimane's engagement with indie music had become explicit as he dressed bands including Franz Ferdinand and the White Stripes. Already a keen photographer of emerging bands and youth tribes, who in turn influenced his collections, he embarked on an ambitious project with V magazine documenting up-and-coming bands in collaboration with journalist Alex Needham (then of NME) resulting in the book *Rock Diary*.

As I have described, a set of 1970s subcultural milieux formed an important source of inspiration for Slimane directly reflected in his design. But while Slimane's interpretation was often imaginative, it was through contemporary youth culture and particularly musical culture that these references had retained their currency. See image 10.

## Conclusion: beyond the glass of fashion

> Each season brings … various secret signals of things to come. Whoever understands how to read these semaphores would know in advance not only about new currents in the arts but also about new legal codes, wars and revolutions. – Here, surely, lies the greatest charm of fashion. (Benjamin 1982: 64)

During his time at Dior Homme and Yves Saint Laurent, Hedi Slimane developed an aesthetic characterized by a focus on clarity and elegance. Clarity expressed through neat tailoring and an attenuated silhouette, and elegance communicated via drape, fine

fabrics, and a new dandyism nodding both to traditional eveningwear and to women's haute couture. As I have described, Hedi Slimane saw himself as intervening not only in the field of menswear, but in masculinity itself.

> Slimane is heralding a more sensitive interpretation of male self-image, at odds with the pumped-up gym stereotype that has dominated menswear for the past two decades […] It's almost a pain to have to insist that those elements do not say anything today. They are archaic, and for me they have nothing to do with the projections men have of themselves, or that their lovers or girlfriends have of them. […] I don't know when it's going to happen, but it absolutely has to change'. (Slimane 2001, cited in Porter 2001)

By rejecting an exaggerated performance of masculinity in favour of a more ambiguous model Slimane's collections schematized the precarious nature of male identity in the opening decade of the twenty-first century. While the figure of rarefied ethereal beauty which he proposed was in some ways a problematic one –fetishizing youth, slimness, and vulnerability – his intervention did act materially to open up discourses around the representation of masculinity. Slimane's ability to catalyze discourses and create new possibilities is evidenced both in media responses to his work and in his influence on popular and high-street fashions which I describe in *A Transformation of Menswear*.

If fashion heralds social and political change, as Walter Benjamin suspects, it is intriguing to consider the place of Slimane's millennial man in a new ideology of gender. As I have described, Slimane's contribution to men's fashion was significant not only at the level of form and aesthetic but, through a deft manipulation of visual semantics, as an intervention in the language of masculinity. That this intervention was experienced as meaningful and significant, is evident both in the journalistic accounts of the early 2000s, and indeed, in my own more personal observations**.**

The notion that fashion acts as a *reflection* of society's values and mores is found in both Baudelaire (Baudelaire 1864: 12) and Benjamin, and is an assumption implicit to much scholarly writing in the field. In this article, I have attempted to move beyond the model of fashion as a mirror by explicitly locating Hedi Slimane as a cultural actor. This approach is founded in my belief that fashion can be 'read' as an authored text as much as analyzed as subtext, and can act as an intervention in culture as much as a reflection.

While it is difficult to anticipate the extent to which Slimane's design will continue to resonate in the future, his significance in the development of men's fashion in the first decade of this century is difficult to overstate. The attention Slimane bought to Dior Homme instigated a renewed interest in menswear reflected in today's proliferation of menswear magazines, dedicated fashion weeks, and new labels. By demonstrating that men's fashion could experiment with silhouette and fabrication, and with the language of masculinity, Slimane effectively expanded the parameters of what was deemed possible in his field, his influence is clearly evident in the work of contemporary designers including Kris Van Assche, Lucas Ossendrijver, and Damir Doma who share many of his concerns for silhouette and fabrication. Beyond these direct influences, Slimane's formation of Dior Homme has gone on to embolden and enliven a new generation of designers by proving that creative menswear could be

commercially viable. In this way, the formal and aesthetic diversity of contemporary men's fashion, and the new possibilities for the expression of gender it offers are the legacies of Slimane's pioneering approach.

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[1] Adrian Clark, All About Yves; As the new looks for the new millennium hit the catwalk last week, one label stood head and shoulders above the rest (The Guardian 3rd of February 1999) digital accessed 01/12/12.

[2] A similar association is heard in Mark Simpson's coinage of the term 'metrosexual' (15 November 1994) 'Here come the mirror men', London: *The Independent*, digital accessed 03/04/13.

[3] Raf Simons had presented androgynous menswear collections in the 1990s including A/W 1996 We Only Come Out at Night and S/S 1997 How to Talk to Your Teen but this influence was predominantly felt within a niche, experimental, fashion literate crowd. Tom Ford also pioneered a closer fit in his Gucci menswear collections during the 1990s. Though both designers were significant, they do not attract the claims of paradigm shift made by various journalists about Slimane.

[4] Richardson, Niall (2010) *Transgressive Bodies: Representations in Film and popular Culture,* London: Ashgate, pp. 25-39.