

All consuming images



What is Ewen trying to understand in regards to the 'politics' of style and what are his research questions? Which methods does he use to conduct this analysis? Ewen in his study of style is trying to understand how this came to be of "utmost" importance in our society. Obviously, considering himself a scholar and trying to make an impact on his students, Ewen is perplexed, when after reviewing the impact of the mass media on our society, the most important question a student can ask him, is "Where did you get your shoes?" Why does it matter? This is what Ewen wants to understand. When did style become representative of all that we are?

And how did it become tied to social power. Ewen, although able to recognize the symbols of style in our society, through images on magazines, fashion, interior design, found it difficult to define what style is, and the "universal preoccupation" with style in this society. Ewen believed that understanding this preoccupation, would ultimately provide an understanding of this contemporary culture. Ewen was curious of this notion, that made such an impact on our society, yet lacked concrete understanding. Style is elusive, yet craved by everyone. "This conception of style is both perceptive and confounding. The idea that style

is a way that the human values, structures, and assumptions in a given society are aesthetically expressed and received is a powerful insight." Ewen found that the concept of style was often determined by current fads or modes of behavior. Style can be defined by its currency, and also defined by its consumption. "One of the main points of a style is that it will not remain current." Ewen asked his students to write an essay entitled "What Style Means to Me." He established the ground rules:

- No dictionary

definitions • Noacademicor research papers • Draw on your own experiences and feelings about style

Ewen believed that each of their essays would reveal how their definition of style was essentially part of their history and experience. " Every story could be pursued to reveal many things about the particular individuals and groups that are spoken for: the way people express themselves, the way they conform, the way they rebel. " Ewen found through their essays that their were similarities in that at some point, most of them equated style with consumption and the power of the mass media to define and influence popular notions of style. Ewen wants to determine the meaning of the prominence, significance and

consumption of style, and how it has come to be a contemporary phenomenon. Ewen is concerned about the ability of the mass media to define style and its ability to create a way of life. " The people we view apparently inhabit a universe of bounty. They wear dresses costing thousands. They live in castles. Their encounters with interior designers lead to unrestrained flights of fancy. Their desires, their fantasies, their whims are painlessly translated into objective forms. There are no conflicts. In the name of " good taste," there is no mention of cost. There is no anxiety about affordability. "

Style, in contemporary culture, appears to offer the opportunity to have all that one desires, without ever even questioning if it what should be desired. Question 2 Using THREE EXAMPLES from the book, explain at least two ways that personal experience (and/or identity) is related to the politics of style. According to Ewen, the power of style has become an increasingly feature in

the lives of individuals. " Style is a visible reference point by which we have come to understand life in progress. " Take for example the invitation that an individual may receive from American Express, to receive their new Gold Card.

" Only a select group will ever carry the Gold Card. So it instantly identifies you as someone special--one who expects an added measure of courtesy and personal attention. . . . The Gold Card says more about you than anything you can buy with it. We think it's time you joined the select group who carry it. It is a gesture that speaks volumes. It says you are someone special--whose style of living requires very special privileges. Someone whose financial credentials rank among the nation's highest. Someone who appreciates--indeed, has come to expect--an extra measure of courtesy and personal attention. In fact, the Gold Card in your name

says more about you than almost anything you can buy with it. " This is a promise of " unspoken prestige. " You will be seen. You will be noticed. The symbols you display, your most valuable possessions, will permit you to stand apart from the crowd. You will be noteworthy and honored. You will be someone. You will have " joined the select group. " Only the faint remnant of perforations--at the top and bottom edges of the personalized letter--suggests that this promise of individual identity is being made, simultaneously, to a mass of others. This is a typical manner in which the mass media and consumerism do define style, as

identified by Ewen. It speaks to the quality of life that will be held by the person who has the " Gold Card," as though being identified as royalty. This person not only has style and power, but already has the American Dream. "

When a rising middle class of merchants began to appropriate the marks of style from the late Middle Ages on, it was a tangible expression of their increasing power, both locally and globally. When they took on the vestments, titles, and properties previously monopolized by the aristocracy, it was because they had assumed a central, increasingly decisive position in the world.

While political structures took time to acknowledge their franchise, these merchant capitalists were becoming men of power. " According to Ewen, this middle class claiming of power, was a mask, to let them feel as powerful as the elite that claimed social power. " Its symbolic identification with power, this " middle class" performed, and continues to perform, a political function; it effects divisions among people who otherwise might identify with one another. " Ewen cites the impact of the mass media and its ability to convince the American public of their personal worth as evidenced by their style. " By the late 1950s, Fortune

magazine asserted, nearly all Americans had the option of " choosing a whole style of life": A skilled mechanic who earns \$7, 500 after taxes may choose to continue living in " working class" style, meanwhile saving sizable sums for his children's college education; or he may choose to live like a junior executive in his own \$17, 000 suburban house; or he may choose to live in a city apartment house otherwise occupied by business and professional men. When the American " masses" have options of this breadth, . . . it is scarcely an exaggeration to suggest that we have arrived at a landmark in all the history of human freedoms.

(1) people constantly express their personalities not so much in words as in symbols (ie: mannerisms, dress, ornaments, possessions); (2) most people are increasingly concerned about what other people think of them, and hence about their social status. Thus the taste of many Americans is expressed in symbols of various social positions. . . . people tend to buy things that symbolize their aspirations. Our social status and hence our social power are identified by our belongings and those personal possessions that we choose. Question 3 In the closing chapter, Ewen begins by suggesting that “ In American Society today

‘ image management’ has become both a lucrative business...” and a necessity. He concludes that “ in countless aspects of life the powers of appearance have come to overshadow, or to shape, the way we comprehend matters of substance. ” What are his conclusions regarding this form of social control? What do you think of his argument? What began for Ewen as a quest to understand why one student found more importance in his shoes than his message, Ewen uncovered what is perhaps our failing in contemporary society. Image management in contemporary society is a billion dollar

business, with people being willing to do whatever it takes, to achieve the perfect status and the perfect image. The perfect image sells! Image is created by an individuals style. For most individuals, style is created by what is identified in the mass media as valuable, status enhancing, and important. Our priorities are in great part determined by what the mass media determines as important. This is a belief that is upheld by not only the commercial industry but our main sources of news: “ If the news helps to

promulgate an ongoing cognitive confusion, closely related are the dominant channels of political influence.

As far back as the presidency of Andrew Jackson, when the vote was extended beyond the propertied classes, political style makers have negotiated between the objective power and interests of ruling elites on the one hand, and rising popular democratic aspirations on the other. Social inequalities of wealth and opportunity were transformed, by the hoodoo of political promotion, into a consensual notion of " common interest. " I absolutely agree that the perception or attitude represents " the ascendancy of politics as pure public relations. " If we continue to reduce all social issues to simply matters of

perception, that is the only place where we will see change. If that is how we address social needs, we will only see an image change, rather than real change that is needed. " The impulse to dissociate images from social experience, or to present images as a surrogate for experience, is reiterated throughout our culture. The perpetual repetition of this dynamic--affecting our sense. " Ewen represents a compelling study of the effect of image and style on contemporary society. The value of individuals in this society is determined by their image and their ability to project that image to others.