



Breaking the Rules

Fashion and Film in “Swinging Britain”

When *TIME* magazine baptized London “the Swinging City” in April 1966, it placed the British capital at the centre of the “Swinging Sixties” discourse. While there exists a significant body of research exploring British cinema of the decade in general (Hill; Murphy), and examining fashion in films of the decade in particular (Church Gibson; Landy), there remains little work to date on film audiences from this period. This article considers some of the findings from the AHRC-funded project “Cultural Memory and British Cinema-going of the 1960s,” the first major project which has set out to gather and explore the memories of film-goers from 1960s Britain. Its methodology is based on that of earlier ethnographic studies of audiences, including those by Helen Taylor, Jackie Stacey, and Annette Kuhn. Drawing on a wide range of materials, including over 800 questionnaire responses and 40 interviews, the project seeks to shed new light on the social and cultural history of cinema in the 1960s, and to contribute to a broader reappraisal of British social and cultural history during the decade.

This article focuses specifically on a small selection of these findings, and considers the memories of twelve of the project’s respondents. These memories are discussed as a means to re-evaluate recollections of, and responses to, representations of fashion in 1960s cinema. While the

project participants were not questioned about memories of fashion in 1960s films directly, a small number raised the issue themselves, and their responses are considered below. Building on existing work that has primarily examined the relationship between female spectators and female stars (Stacey; Moseley), this article considers the pleasures and meanings derived by both female and male British film-goers who have shared their memories of enjoying and emulating fashion in the films of the 1960s. It argues that, while the lives of many people living in 1960s Britain did not change dramatically throughout the decade, screen representations of fashion and “Swinging London” had a significant ideological impact on many cinema-goers, both within and beyond the capital. Notably, that fashion and consumer culture, as seen in the films of the decade, were strongly linked to notions of generational identity, and invoked memories of a desire for social and cultural change. These memories are considered as reconstructions of the past, which while they might not always be entirely accurate or reliable, contribute to a better understanding of the culture of cinema-going in the 1960s and how it related to people’s lived experiences.

1960s Britain witnessed a number of significant social changes such as the introduction of the contraceptive pill and the passage of the Sexual Offences (1964), Race Rela-

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tions (1965), *Obscene Publications* (1967) and *Abortion* (1967) Acts. These all contributed to the perception of an increasingly “liberal” society. Several film academics have usefully contested such claims, particularly in relation to the supposed newfound freedoms for women. Central to these discussions has been the image of the “new, *déclassé* English girl” (Seebohm 34) who, for many, was epitomized by Julie Christie in films such as *Billy Liar* (John Schlesinger, 1963) and *Darling* (Schlesinger, 1965), swinging her handbag insouciantly as she strolled along the pavement. Melanie Bell, for example, has argued, that “the sexually liberated young woman was central to the myth of ‘Swinging Britain,’ but she was frequently reduced to nothing more than a sex object, paraded across a range of cultural texts for the pleasures of the heterosexual male” (81). Similarly, Sue Harper suggests that British films of the 1960s were “far more prescriptive towards women than they had been in the 1950s” (102). Drawing on research into the production contexts of 1960s British cinema, Harper argues that:

The Swinging Britain myth bore little relation to many people’s lived experience. If anyone did interpret the myth as a reflection of reality they might fairly have expected the whole country to be populated by young girls with visible knickers and flexible morality, who were good at sprinting along pavements. However, they would have been disappointed. (101-2)

While it is true that, for those who lived in provincial or rural parts of Britain during the 1960s, memories of “Swinging London,” or more generalized notions of “Swinging Britain,” were unlikely to be first-hand, the findings of this project suggest that, for some, they nevertheless carried an important cultural resonance. Alison was born in 1953, and grew up in a working-class family in Yorkshire. She recalls:

I was a little young for being involved in the “Swinging Sixties” and very much under my parents’ control. So although these films were a little interesting they did not feel too relevant, as I could not relate to the experiences they were portraying. If anything I suppose they left me (and possibly) my friends feeling

left out and a little resentful because we couldn’t get involved in the lifestyles portrayed, as we were too young. *Billy Liar* was very interesting though as it was filmed around Bradford when the city was being re-developed. In some scenes you can see the bulldozers at work! And Julie Christie’s character was such a free spirit!

Although Alison did not directly experience what she terms the “Swinging Sixties,” she recalls an awareness of the lifestyles represented in films such as *Billy Liar*, and a desire to be involved in them more directly. Similarly, Linda was born in 1950, and grew up in a lower middle class family in rural Cumbria. Her teenage memories of watching the “Swinging London” films, such as *Darling* and *Alfie* (Lewis Gilbert, 1966), were that they offered her “an insight into the ways other people lived, the girls usually had the trendy hairstyles and fashionable clothes. Up in Cumbria we were way behind with the fashions. Those girls with their mini-skirts, bobbed hairstyles and PVC coats and long boots... if only.” For Linda, although the world of “Swinging London” was remote, it was also highly desirable, even aspirational. Another female respondent, Anne, was born in 1943 and grew up in a working-class family in South Wales. Her memories of watching the “Swinging Sixties” films also reflect an interest in the fashions seen on the big screen:

With the “Swinging London” films, it was more a desire to be part of it. We would copy the clothes and fashions, especially Julie Christie. I think I wanted to be her for a while. But, of course, our lives weren’t like that. We got married and had children, like our mothers did. So things didn’t really change that much. I worked for one year before I got married, and then I was a housewife. So, there was only a surface nod to the things I saw in films, just the way I dressed, the fashions.

For female film-goers like Anne, their lives might not have resembled those of the characters they saw in 1960s films, but their wardrobes often did. Anne recalls enjoying “the thrill” of wearing clothes that her mother disapproved of, even though their actual lives were not so dissimilar. In this way, emulating the screen fashions of stars like Julie Christie offered some female cinema-goers small acts of resistance and subversion in an otherwise unchanged cultural landscape.

The star persona of Julie Christie is referenced, in the memories of many female cinema-goers, as someone they aspired to look like. Living a considerable distance from

the metropolitan hub of London did not necessarily lead to a sense of alienation or distance from the “swinging” culture of the capital city, as represented in films like *Darling*. Helen was born in 1953, and grew up in a working-class family in rural Nottinghamshire. When asked whether the “Swinging Sixties” films corresponded in any way to her memories of the decade, she recalls that “I did not have Julie Christie’s life, but the actresses were wearing clothes we had copies of, and she walked past shops we knew, so yes, in a way they did.” The activity of copying and making outfits seen on film actresses was not uncommon during the period, as Rachel Moseley has



established in relation to female fans of Audrey Hepburn (“Dress, Class and Audrey Hepburn”). This often formed part of a broader project of developing a distinctive type of gendered identity. Christine Geraghty points out that, unlike the high-end glamour of many female stars from the 1950s, “Christie’s clothes, while marked as those of a star, would also have been available through boutiques and dressmaking patterns to young women in the audience” (105). For women like Helen, copying Christie’s style formed part of a broader consumerist pleasure taken in shopping and following women’s fashion, and accessibility was a key factor. The representation of fashion on the big screen was, then, distinctly linked to the new consumer culture that developed in Britain throughout the decade.

So what did Christie’s fashion and sense of style mean to those women and girls who emulated it? As Pamela Church Gibson suggests, “the new ‘London’ films provided an opportunity to showcase different forms of fashionable behaviour, dress and décor, while at the same time subjecting them to a stern critique” (86). Indeed, several scholars have focused in particular on the fate of Diana Scott (played by Julie Christie) in *Darling*, arguing that the film’s narrative punishes the female protagonist for her promiscuous behaviour (August 82-83; Tarr 64). However, despite such readings of the film’s narrative, memories offered by female cinema-goers suggest that they took great pleasure in their admiration and emulation of Christie’s style in *Darling*; in this respect, their enjoyment of on-screen fashion transcended the apparent limitations of

the narrative. Jane grew up in rural Scotland, and explains her enjoyment of the “Swinging London” films in the context of broader generational attitudes. She recalls that she “liked the style and the fashion and the references to sexual freedom and independence. They were part of feeling like a member of a new generation.” A smaller number of male respondents also recall taking similar pleasures in watching Christie’s performances. Martin was born in 1951, and grew up in a lower middle-class family in Bristol. He recounts that, of the “Swinging London” films,

Darling was the best of the bunch and the only one I remember seeing during the 1960s. There was something about the Christie-Bogarde relationship that felt decadent—caught the loosening mood of the times. Julie Christie looked both glamorous and startlingly independent. Plus the end of the film opened up the possibility of European hedonism.

Both male and female audiences, then, recall recognizing in Christie a quality of independence and sexual freedom that seemed to them highly appealing.

In addition to admiring Christie’s “independence,” respondents to the survey repeatedly use a number of other terms to describe her star persona. These include “modern,” “fashionable,” “cool,” and “a free spirit.” Her appeal contrasts sharply, then, with that of Audrey Hepburn, who respondents describe as “elegant,” “well-dressed,” and “gamine” in memories of her 1960s films. As Moseley has observed, “Hepburn offered a way of being which enabled the British women I spoke with to negotiate a path between fashionable modernity and respectability, to

use clothes as both protection and ornament” (120). Christie, on the other hand, seems to have offered the female audiences who admired or copied her style a kind of enjoyment. Anne remembers: “it made you feel alive to see her walking down the streets of Bradford at the beginning of *Billy Liar*.” Judy was born in 1946 and grew up in a lower middle class family in Sussex. She recalls, “I remember buying a black-and-white mini-dress like one I saw on Julie Christie. I wore it around Brighton, and it felt daring and terribly modern. Some women made disapproving comments about my bare legs, but I didn’t care!” There is a sense, then, in which Christie’s style embodied a sense of vitality and generational identity. As Geraghty argues,

Christie’s image and performance call the narrative into question by suggesting that feminine discourses of beauty and fashion are not the property of the Establishment, but a way of claiming a feminine identity which can be used as a mode of self-expression, particularly around sexuality. (105)

For middle-class respondents such as Judy, copying Christie’s fashions provided a means to push the boundaries of social conformity by imitating these “daring” expressions of female sexuality.

For those who lived in and around London rather than the provinces during the 1960s, memories of the permissive era are more often first-hand. Furthermore, it is not just female respondents from the London area who remember the importance of fashion in films of the 1960s. Michael was born in 1936 and lived in Kensington and Chelsea throughout the decade, working primarily as an antiques dealer. He recalls wearing “op art” shirts and ties as a form of rebellion against social norms regarding men’s fashions that were prevalent at the time. Michael explains the significance of “op art” fashions as follows:

When you wore [an op art] tie, you couldn’t see if you had a tie on or not, because they were the same, it was all zig-zags, things like that. So when I went into the Dorchester for lunch one day, the doorman said “I’m sorry, you can’t go in there, sir, you haven’t got a tie on,” and I just went like this [lifts imaginary



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tie], I had this invisible tie. That’s one thing. And for women, my good friend Mary, she went into Claridges for dinner, with her husband and a friend, wearing a trouser suit and she was stopped from going in. The doorman said “I’m very sorry, we don’t allow women with trousers in here,” so she took her trousers off and walked in with a jacket, which was like a mini skirt.’ Now, you see that made him look like an idiot, both those events made them idiots, but it was a kind of ... it was this mood, it was a ruse. So, any films that captured that, were in a way just slightly rebellious.

Michael goes on to discuss the subversive humour of the Beatles, whose films often captured this irreverent mood through their rebellious sense of fashion; his memories reflect the social and cultural significance of fashion in “Swinging London,” and the sense of being a “free spirit,” a status which was recognized and admired by many of those who lived in provincial and rural areas. Jill was born in 1941 and in grew up in a lower middle-class family in London. She recalls: that “as a young adult in London during the 1960s, I was of course aware of the changes in our culture. I remember particularly the real revolu-

tion in fashion, as Mary Quant and Courrèges became popular, and these changes were reflected in the films.” Mary was born in 1947, and moved to London from Cambridgeshire in the mid-1960s. She remembers films such as *Darling* and *Blow-up* (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1966) as representing the culture of “Swinging London,” albeit in a somewhat distorted way: “Yes they did, some of it was fantasy of course, but young people were expressing themselves differently for the first time and not just following in their parents footsteps. Sex, of course, became less of a worry for women with the advent of the pill, giving us control over our own bodies.” Mary worked in London in the mid-1960s and thus remembers first-hand how the availability of the contraceptive pill allowed her greater freedom and control over her own sex life. For Michael, Jill and Mary, then, the permissive society was less of a myth and more of a reality. While they acknowledge the role of “fantasy” in screen representations of the era, these are understood to relate quite clearly to the social and sexual changes that they themselves had experienced.

Mini-skirts and Mary Quant bobs were not the only looks to be associated with “Swinging London.” Towards the end of the decade, “flower power” became an increasingly popular movement and fashion statement. Jenny was born in 1946, and grew up in a lower middle class family in Hastings. She remembers, that “in 1965 I was walking around London barefooted with flowers in my hair!” It was in the latter half of the decade that counter-cultural films from the United States also had an impact in Britain, challenging earlier consumerist ideas of what was fashionable. Recalling their memories of watching *Easy Rider* (Dennis Hopper, 1969), some respondents reflected on how “it spoke to them personally” at the time. Stephen was born in 1947, and grew up in a working-class family in Derbyshire. He recounts that he watched *Easy Rider* several times, because “it made me feel so alive, when we were all so jaded and tired of consumerism. Growing your hair and wearing ‘hippie’ clothes meant something different then, you felt like you were doing something important, you were breaking the rules.” Although the look was quite dissimilar to the “op art” ties worn by Michael,

Stephen’s emulation of the “hippie” style seen in *Easy Rider* meant more than simply favouring a particular fashion trend: like Michael, he was employing fashion politically, as part of a subversive response to the Establishment of the era.

Fashions in interior *décor* are also discussed in the recollections of a few cinema-goers. Michael recalls a trip to New York, during which he was invited to watch a film at Andy Warhol’s studio:

In New York I went to The Factory and [Warhol’s] done, he’s ironed silver paper onto the walls, which is exactly what I’d done to my shop, my shop was all silver, it was like silver paper that you ironed on, and when you ironed it, it stuck to the wall. My shop, which I opened in ’65, was decorated like that, it was terribly daring and modern, and in his studio, his factory, was also the same silver walls, much better done than mine.

Outlandish wallpaper and “daring” interior *décor* can also be observed in several films of the decade, and underscore the significance of the growing consumer culture developing in Britain, and elsewhere. Jenny recalls the pleasures of seeing “purple wallpaper” in *Blow-up*, and Michael remembers watching films carefully to try and spot the art deco furniture. Sue Harper has wryly observed that “those who thought art had straightforward consequences might have expected the sales of lilac photography paper to skyrocket after the orgy scene in Antonioni’s *Blow-up* (1966). They would have been crestfallen” (102). In many respects she is right, in that the relationship between cinema-goers and on-screen fashions in interior *décor* is not a straight-



forward one; rather, it reveals the growing desire to make interesting or “daring” consumer choices, even if this was not always followed through. As Stephen recalls, “in our first home, we used wrapping paper as wallpaper, because it was much more interesting, and cheaper!” While these might not have been common cultural practices, they nonetheless reflect a particular sensibility that was characteristic of the era.

Though discussions aimed at debunking the “myth” of “Swinging London” have been grounded in thorough historical research, it is possible that they have downplayed the impact which social and cultural changes of the era *did* have on people—both in terms of the lives of those directly involved, and the repercussions for those watching from a distance. The ideological function of fashion in cinema-goers’ memories of the era, both onscreen and offscreen, can be understood in several ways. Firstly, there is a sense of longing articulated in the memories of those cinema-goers who, like Alison and Linda, did not directly experience the fashions of “Swinging London.” This was often followed, or accompanied, by the activity of emulating styles seen on stars such as Julie Christie. The “thrill” of copying Christie’s free-spirited and “daring” fashions offered women such as Anne and Judy, whose lives resembled those of their mothers, small acts of subversion in an otherwise rather humdrum existence. These memories can also be understood alongside Michael and Stephen’s memories of appropriating a range of different fashions as acts of cultural resistance. Finally, as Geraghty argues, the remembered pleasures of 1960s cinema-going need to be “placed firmly within the context of consumption” (103). Whether shopping for clothes that emulated Christie’s style, or ironing silver paper onto a shop wall, the joys of cinema-going were inextricably linked to those of the burgeoning consumer culture of the 1960s.

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