



ARTICLE

Through the (New) Looking Glass

Gendered bodies, fashion and resistance in postwar

New Zealand

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Abstract. In 1947, French designer Christian Dior released the New Look, a style of women's clothing characterized by long, stiffened skirts and wasp waistlines. For Dior, the fashion offered a glamorous, feminine look following many women's more functional – and ostensibly masculine – wartime garb. The 'Look' arrived in New Zealand from Europe in mid-1948. The New Zealand debates around the fashion offer a useful 'looking glass' into contemporary cultural and political currents, as the female body adorned in 'the Look' can be understood as a site at which regimes of bodily discipline, debates over women's work and discourses of 'women's emancipation' converged. This article examines a range of New Zealand women's responses to 'the Look' in order to critically interrogate these convergences and to re-examine intellectual debates over consumption, pleasure, domination and resistance. The New Look engendered a complex web of embraces and resistances and this suggests a more nuanced framing of conceptions of domination and resistance in consumption studies than has often been the case.

Key words

consumption • fashion • feminism • gender • media • resistance



Figure 1: The New Look, *Mirror*, August 1949, p. 49. © The Hocken Library, University of Otago, New Zealand

Feminist resistance, in particular, begins with the body's refusal to be subordinated, an instinctual withdrawal from the patriarchal forces to which it is often violently subjected. (Faith, 1994: 39)

INTRODUCTION

In 1947, French clothing designer Christian Dior unveiled a new style for women: the 'New Look'. New Zealand had long taken its lead in fashion from Europe and Britain, and by mid-1948 the New Look had reached antipodean shores. The garment featured in Figure 1 is one of the dresses in the style available ready-made in New Zealand (*Mirror*, 1949: 49).

The Look was characterized by a lavish use of fabric and a new, longer-length stiffened skirt. Some of the designs featured ruffled necklines, generous use of brocade, furs, lace, or embroidery in gold and silver thread. The most notable aspect of the new style was the wasp waistline, which recalled the women's fashions of the Victorian era. This styling appeared to herald a return to a true 'femininity', following the rigors of a wartime period in which some women, at least, had taken up 'men's' jobs (Turim, 1990: 213). Dior himself welcomed a revival of a more traditional form of femininity, seeking to vanquish the 'Amazons' who had allegedly risen to prominence in the wartime workplace (Walsh, 1984: 77).

The New Look clearly involved more than a new form of adornment for the female body. The style and its reception by women both reflected and influenced a number of interrelated, at times contradictory, social processes and shifts. The Second World War facilitated new work opportunities for women, which signified for some women new possibilities, if not progress and 'emancipation'. At the same time, wartime evoked austerity. Shortages and rationing of numerous consumer items lingered and some women looked forward to a little luxury. After the war, tensions existed between the notion that women would move forward to a future involving new career possibilities and greater participation in the public sphere, and the understanding that women should 'return to domesticity' and concentrate on attaining high standards of sexual attractiveness for returning servicemen.

The emergence of the New Look into a social context in which these particular dynamics were at play invites interesting questions about the relationships between fashion, gender, public and private engagement, and female subjectivity. How does the deployment of this particular fashion relate to the ongoing negotiations around female desires, aspirations, bodies and subjectivities in the years immediately following the war? Is it useful to

examine the phenomenon in terms of pleasure, denial, domination and resistance?

The existing literature which explores women's consumption of the New Look explores pleasure, denial, domination and resistance as explanatory concepts. However, the analysis is often limited by ways in which the wider conceptual debates are framed. In particular, appeals to the importance of pleasure seek to pre-empt the conclusion that the New Look prescribed a return to a regressive, if not oppressive, form of femininity. Instead, it is argued that the pleasures women found in the New Look need be recuperated for feminist analysis and that women exerted agency in desiring the new fashion despite 'official condemnation' (Maynard, 1995: 43; Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 2000: 92).

This privileging of pleasure over domination appears to have two antecedents. One is the turn within the literature on consumption in which the theoretical priority afforded domination has given way to a focus on consumption as pleasure and resistance. The view propounded by Frankfurt theorists Adorno and Marcuse, in which consumption is a means through which the populace is manipulated into passivity and thus rendered docile for capitalism (Cross, 1993), has been eclipsed by the argument that consumption offers a source of pleasure which itself enables resistance to the most alienating aspects of capitalism and patriarchy. From this perspective, the earlier, more critical views are considered 'elitist' if not 'puritanical' (Nava, 1999).¹ The second antecedent lies within the 'feminist sexuality debates' of the 1980s. Radical feminist writings had understood heterosexuality as a form of institutionalized male domination, which conditioned the very circumstances for women's experiences, pleasurable or otherwise (Leidholt and Raymond, 1990; Thompson, 1991). In contrast, those opposing this analysis reasserted the primacy of women's heterosexual pleasure and sometimes even accused radical feminism of campaigning for moral purity (Snitow et al., 1984; Vance, 1984).

Here I employ an analysis of New Zealand women's responses to the New Look in an attempt to reframe some of the alignments within the debates around consumption, resistance and pleasure. I suggest that we cannot understand women living in the 1940s as dupes who passively adopted the New Look simply because it was presented to them; however, nor can we uncritically assume that women necessarily saw the fashion as pleasurable and worth revelling in. Perhaps, most importantly, it is at the point where women saw the New Look as something to be resisted where we can gain valuable insights into resistance to consumption within particular historical and cultural moments.

My analysis commences with an historical account of the material and ideological conditioning of gender relations in New Zealand following the Second World War. I thereby introduce some of the social processes which created the New Look, as well as the conditions into which the fashion was received once it reached New Zealand shores in 1948. This account is followed by a much closer discourse analysis of the writings of a number of New Zealand women who responded to the New Look by writing to, and getting published in, a number of print media forums. In this way, I am able to examine the means by which a range of postwar tensions, shifts and anxieties over the reformulation of gender relations were played out upon the bodies and within the subjectivities of some individual female consumers.

In undertaking this task, however, I reject the notion that we can know what 'women' as a totality thought or felt about the New Look. A more nuanced analysis based on social semiotics allows the recognition that 'woman' is not a tidy, unified totality which speaks/spoke in one voice. This sensitivity is achieved by examining the discursive resources which women were able to appropriate, employ and alter as they responded to the fashion and negotiated its meaning for them. In these print media accounts, the New Look was sometimes embraced as a welcome return to femininity following the austerity of wartime, but it was also sometimes resisted as a material and symbolic form of restraint and discipline upon women's bodies and women's 'freedom'. In embracing or resisting the New Look, women were embracing or resisting various forms of femininity, but these responses were sometimes intertwined in complex ways. McNay's (1999: 183) point that domination and resistance do not play out in clear-cut, dichotomous ways is well taken.

My discussion of the socio-historical context for the New Look, and women's engagements with it, draws upon a number of print media publications for 1948 and 1949 when the fashion made its presence felt in New Zealand. The *NZ Truth* (NZT), still in circulation today, is a tabloid newspaper which had at the time a high circulation and a reputation for somewhat salacious reporting of 'sex and violence'. The *NZ Woman's Weekly* (NZWW) had at that time the highest circulation of New Zealand's women's magazines. Two other, now discontinued, journals also targeted a female readership: the *NZ Home Journal* (NZHJ) and the *Mirror*, somewhat confusingly subtitled *The Home Journal of New Zealand*. The publications all contained advertisements, news articles and editorial opinion. In addition, both NZWW and NZHJ sought the submission of page-length opinion pieces from the general public, as well as readers' letters. NZT's populist

appeal was matched by the publication of a substantial number of letters to the editor, which filled a broadsheet-sized page each week.

THE NEW LOOK AND ITS SOCIAL CONTEXT

Involving as it did an hourglass figure which emphasized bust and hips, the New Look has been regarded by some feminist historians, as well as Dior himself, as symbolizing a postwar 'refeminization' of women and an accordant retreat to women's ostensibly 'natural' sphere of the home following women's increased involvement in paid work during the war (Maynard, 1995). Bordo (1993) has argued that the often-corseted wasp waist, a centerpiece of 'the Look', had long symbolized and reinscribed separate social spheres for men and women (p. 181). The New Look therefore played a powerful part in attempts to redefine women from paid workers in the public sphere to wives and mothers in the private sphere of home and family (McNeil, 1993: 283). The shift from public to private that the New Look symbolized tied in neatly with pronatalist rhetoric, even if the wasp waist was itself antithetical to the pregnant female form!

In its original form the fashion restricted freedom of movement for the wearers, as restrictive undergarments including bodices and corsets were employed to achieve wasp waistlines for those not lucky enough to have a small waist already (Maynard, 1995; McKergow, 2000; McNeil, 1993). The New Look dovetailed with injunctions to women to rediscover their feminine 'beauty' in order to satisfy their returning servicemen husbands and boyfriends, and a sexualization of women in advertising and popular literature which accompanied pronatalist rhetoric (Lake, 1996). While fulfilling these prescriptions for femininity, the New Look promised style and a little luxury for women following wartime deprivations.

Having made this point, however, a recent revisionist historical literature has questioned earlier depictions of the 1940s as an unrelentingly conformist, conservative decade that was entirely preoccupied with traditional femininity, domesticity and pronatalism.² This recent writing suggests that while the 1940s may have been conservative in many ways, the period was not unrelentingly so. For example, Lake (1996) sees impulses towards both conservatism and changes to the gender order in the social organization of late 1940s Australia. While (re)emerging prescriptions for women's sexual attractiveness involved a strenuous affirmation and reinforcement of sexual difference, some women did enjoy a new sense of 'independence, self-reliance, and autonomy' (p. 431). Meyerowitz (1994a, 1994b) suggests that postwar prescriptions for women's domesticity in the US were tempered within popular culture by celebrations of nondomestic activity for women.

The historiography from New Zealand has started to exhibit a similar pattern. Until the mid-1990s it was argued that the New Zealand of the 1940s was a uniformly dull and conformist society which was harsh on dissenters and which labelled women who wished to remain engaged within the public sphere in preference to homemaking and child raising as 'deviants' (King, 1988; Molloy, 1992; Pearson, 1952; Yska, 1993). Authors have more recently started to revise this image. For example, McKergow (2000) rejects the proposition that 'these decades were characterised by a grim austerity, followed by a stifling and hide-bound conservatism' in favour of a 'richer, more multi-layered view' (p. 164) and Labrum (2000) suggests that the postwar years were 'riven with contradictions, tensions and ambiguities' (p. 188). Nolan (2000) demonstrates how the state's postwar reassertion of domesticity was accompanied by its (paradoxical) call for women to enter the paid workforce.³ According to Fyfe (1995), the desires of some women to continue with their careers after the war was a vital precondition for 1970s feminism (p. 15), while Andrewes (1995) has also suggested that doubts over the continuing hold of masculinity on New Zealand life were evidenced by the stridency of demands for its recognition during the late 1940s (p. 7).

This revisionist analysis usefully challenges reductionist impressions of the 1940s, thus allowing a consideration of the ways in which prevailing relationships of power were subject to varying degrees of contestation. This emerging complexity can be further enhanced if we concede an analytical separation between ideological prescriptions and popular responses to them. The ideological prescriptions offered by institutionally supported opinion-makers (including, for example, advertisers, news editors and psychologists) do not directly condition their responses and we cannot therefore interpret popular responses from the prescriptions. This is significant, for the prescriptions and responses in circulation at a given moment may vary in the degrees of conservatism or transformative potential they exhibit.

Some prescriptive ideologies circulating in the New Zealand of the late 1940s did reinforce domesticity and traditional femininity. The mass media devoted a considerable amount of space to homemaking advice, articles on improving marriages, and 'scientifically efficient' modes of housework. Some articles appeared which advised women to favour marriages over careers, although even these recognized the possibility of careers outside the home. The NZWW printed a number of articles by men which sought to reinforce traditional femininity. One of the most notable was titled 'Rejectors of their sex', and fused older ideas about 'masculinized' women with the psychological discourses rapidly gaining prominence. The author drew

upon Adler's psychologizing about the 'masculine protest', suggesting that 'women were trying to reject their own sex and ape the other' (Dassent, 1948: 10).⁴ Dassent suggested that women who desired to enter professions such as law were renouncing 'the feminine role in life' and 'the honour and privilege of being a mother' (p. 10). He argued that this renouncing of motherhood should be abandoned in favour of the notion of separate but equal spheres for women and men.

Editorially, however, the NZWW was more inclined to support women's engagement in the public sphere. Editorials extolled the importance of equal pay, urging 'the women of this country to go on record as having fought and won the battle of equal pay for equal work!' (NZWW, 1948); and suggesting that 'there is still a certain amount of prejudice against women doctors, lawyers, members of parliament, etc., but this is less than it was ten years ago, and far less than twenty years ago' (p. 1). *Freedom*, the weekly newspaper of the otherwise conservative National Party featured a column titled 'Careers for Girls', in which women were encouraged to pursue careers in fields traditionally reserved for men (such as architecture, accountancy and science) and to fight male 'prejudice' against women in the workplace. The columnist suggested that 'there is every chance that a girl can become as good an architect as a man, but she must be prepared to fight against prejudice and perhaps a shortage of interesting work' (*Freedom*, 1948: 6). New Zealand government advertising presented nursing as a 'career' or 'profession' that 'enjoys a status comparable with medicine, law, architecture, and accountancy', and afforded nurses the opportunity to 'see the world' (NZHJ, 1949b: 27). While women reading newspapers and magazines during the late 1940s were often addressed as homemakers, they were sometimes also hailed as potential workers, 'professional' ones at that. Ideological prescriptions were thus not unrelenting in their drive towards domesticity.

Women's wartime involvement in the paid workforce provided a symbolic resource for women who wished to forge a place for themselves outside the home. Montgomerie (1996) has argued that most of New Zealand women's war work did not cut across traditional gendered divisions of labour (p. 110). Be that as it may, the work done by women that did challenge the traditional order gained significant symbolic weight. Having been widely publicized, women's war work in non-traditional occupations provided the basis for discourses within which aspects of traditional femininity could be challenged. The wartime booklet *Women on the Home Front* used women's involvement as 'post-women, land girls, tram-conductors, railway porters, [and] taxi drivers' to herald a 'New Order' for women's

engagement in the public sphere (Guy, 1943: 16). A writer of a letter to the editor responds to one man's suggestion that boys are more 'wonderful' than girls with an appeal to the new truth of equality established during the war: 'surely in wartime our girls proved themselves to be the equal of their brothers in the manly way they tackled men's jobs and carried them through successfully' ('An Old Hand', NZWW, 1948a: 26).⁵

THE NEW LOOK AND THE DISCIPLINED BODY

During the 1940s women's bodies were sites of inscription for these tensions between traditional forms of femininity and the influence of women's wartime engagement within the public sphere. On the one hand, war work invoked the image of an active female body, ever expanding its imposed limits and capabilities as it was engaged within the public as well as the private sphere. On the other hand, women were sexualized and rendered as passive objects of male desire by some journalists and advertisers. The tabloid *Truth* newspaper would regularly construct female movie stars as mere sexual bodies for men's edification:

Dell-icious: That is the word coined by pressmen to aptly describe the nice lines of [actress] Myrna Dell, who is pictured endeavouring to get the most out of California's warm sun, in a nifty strapless bathing suit. (NZT, 1949a: 25)

An advertisement for Vaseline hair tonic asks the woman reader 'Are you a sizzler?', and shows a woman in a bathing costume sprawling passively and seductively (NZWW, 1949a: 40).

Magazines targeted at female audiences contained many articles which exhorted women to take care of their appearances and posture and thus appear feminine at all times. Typical titles included 'Femininity begins at home' and 'In search of beauty' (Benjamin, 1948; Thorp, 1949). An article in the *Mirror* asked readers whether they were the 'drab housewife' or the 'elegant lady' (Wilson, 1947: 25). Advertising, too, exhorted women to appear 'lovely', 'glamorous', 'smart', 'elegant' and 'charming'. An advertisement for cosmetics in NZWW accompanied its promise of 'youthful loveliness' with the slogan 'beauty is your duty', which had appeared in *Vogue* in 1941 (NZWW, 1948e: 23; Wilson, 1987: 44).

Given that the wearing of New Look dresses often required a project of reshaping and/or restraint of the body, the fashion lends itself particularly well to a Foucauldian analysis of power, discipline and normalization, as reworked by feminist theorists.⁶ For Foucault, power operates not primarily as domination imposed upon the subject 'from above' but as a



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Figure 2: 'Give Yourself a "New Look"', *New Zealand Home Journal*, 10 August 1948, p. 29. © The Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand

constituting force emerging 'from below' and working upwards in a capillary manner, through the self and the body and into society. Power constitutes desires, pleasures and bodies, and at the same time bodies are disciplined and may become 'docile' through processes of normalization in which power's effects become ingrained and routinized (Foucault, 1980; 1984). The body is thus culturally and historically variable, 'a site of different, interested power relations at different times and places' (Bailey, 1993: 106). Feminist uses of Foucault's theories focus upon the ways in which a 'particularly feminine' embodiment is constituted on an ongoing basis through the disciplinary and normalizing techniques of power (p. 104). Bodily comportment and adornment are acculturated through the exercise of power in ways which differ between men and women, and which involve female bodies' inscription with a particularly inferior status (Bartky, 1988, 1990).

The advertising that accompanied the introduction of the New Look illustrates these regimes of female body discipline particularly vividly. Many women's bodies required reforming in order to fit the new fashion with its wasp waist and intolerance of 'excess' flesh. One enterprising physical culture studio advertised itself with the slogan 'Give yourself a "new look" with the new Alfred Jenkins Body Culture Course' (NZHJ, 1948b: 29), see Figure 2. The promised outcomes of the course – 'loss of ugly fat', formation of 'body contours' and 'a firm and shapely bosom' – are prerequisites for the New Look. Once the body has achieved the New Look, the fashion can be worn, applied over the foundation of the perfected, disciplined body. Other advertisements displayed a range of undergarments that would refashion and control the body upon which the New Look wardrobes could be applied. 'It takes more than a new frock to give the new look. It takes a new figure', suggested one advertisement for Berlei undergarments (NZHJ, 1948e: 14); 'New fashions need new figures' sloganeered another (NZWW, 1948g: 25), see Figure 3. This second advertisement hinted at women's moral as well as corporeal laxity during wartime, with its suggestion that women had 'sacrificed their figures for a shapeless and disastrous freedom'. Any 'excess' flesh needed to be either eliminated or controlled, and if those desiring the New Look did not wish to restructure their bodies through exercise then they could do so with the help of an undergarment which would 'banish unwanted bulges' (NZWW, 1948d: 33). In reworking the body into a 'new figure' capable of accommodating the New Look, women would carry out the tasks of discipline and surveillance upon themselves.

If the advertisers were to be believed, the undergarments advertised would allow comfort and control simultaneously, rendering body discipline

Fashion begins with a Berlei

NEW FASHIONS NEED NEW FIGURES

Women once sacrificed health and comfort for a wasp waist then later sacrificed their figures for a chapeau and discreet freedom. Women today have it both ways . . . achieving the charms of Victorian curves and freedom too with supple, anatomically correct Berleis that coax inches off the waist. For women's physical well-being has always been a prime concern of Berlei's, originators of the basic five-figure-type principle of correct fitting. When your figure is refashioned by your true-to-type Berlei, you know that your health, posture and figure beauty, too, are receiving expert care.

4 FIGURE TYPES IN THIS 13 FOUNDATION

Berlei
TRUE-TO-TYPE FOUNDATIONS

Figure 3: 'New Fashions Need New Figures', *New Zealand Women's Weekly*, 29 July 1948, p. 25. © The Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand

effortless and effective, thereby not distracting from the sensuous glamour which provided the New Look's justification:

This shaped elastic waist-band is spiced with tiny bones, softly controlling, to keep it smooth and comfy . . . No rolling over, no

digging in, no permitting flesh to bulge – not a chance!
 Everything beautifully under control . . . (NZHJ, 1948d: 52)

It is the apparent ‘comfort’ and effortlessness of this form of body discipline which marks out the 1940s corset from the 19th-century version. Under the heading ‘The charm without the harm’, Berlei promises:

. . . the charm of grandmama’s wasp waist – without the harm
 . . . your Berlei not only increases your beauty and elegance, but
 also guards your health and general wellbeing while reforming
 and refashioning your figure. (NZWW, 1949b: 47)

The allusion to past times seeks to reassure women through demonstrating the technological advances in corsetry design. The ‘new’ corset is hence thoroughly modern and thus offers a form of progress for women. At the same time, a desirable 19th-century feminine ‘charm’ is recuperated for the 1940s. Berlei offers ‘the charm of Victorian curves’ as well as a contemporary ‘anatomically correct’ design of corset. Victorian prescriptions for body shape are translated into the 1940s by way of the scientifically advanced designs of modernity.

Much of the analytical writing about the New Look focuses upon the stylistic details of the fashion, and upon the social context in which the fashion is embedded (McNeil, 1993: 293). It has sometimes been assumed that women have taken pleasure in the Look, and it has been argued that this pleasure is positive for women rather than signifying a return to traditional forms of femininity (Maynard, 1995). Elsewhere, the fashion is described in broad historical sweeps with the suggestion that, while women viewed the Look negatively at first, it became popular later on (McKergow, 2000: 177; Walsh, 1984: 77). Angela Partington’s (1992) approach is more complex in its refusal to engage in totalizing appeals to pleasure or sweeping generalizations about historical shifts. She considers women’s reception of the New Look by examining the ways in which working-class women sampled New Look patterns and mixed them with elements from earlier Utility patterns to create hybrid clothing which articulated their own tastes and preferences.⁷ Rarely, however, do any of these analyses refer to those texts in which women speak or write in their own voices about their responses to the style. We are left wondering how the acculturation of female bodies through fashion at this point in time may have been understood by women themselves.

I mentioned earlier that we cannot understand ‘women’ as a totality that spoke with one voice on the New Look, and we cannot interpret their

responses to it from the ideological prescriptions offered. Jay Lemke's (1995) social semiotic approach offers a more sophisticated and useful methodological stance. Lemke argues that individual voices and social structures constantly interrelate in dynamic and reflexive ways. When we speak about our selves and our social worlds we fashion our own voices from the discursive resources already available within our communities, appropriating 'the words of others to speak a word of our own' (p. 24). In turn, we employ these collectively provided discourses in our renegotiation of meanings, behaviours and social relationships (p. 20). We are always engaged, therefore, not merely in individual utterances, but also in social processes that may propel social change (p. 31). Lemke's position can be usefully synthesized with Teresa de Lauretis's (1986) feminist theorizing of subjectivity. De Lauretis proposes that individual subjectivity is constituted at the intersection of meaning and experience (p. 9). As meanings are potentially fluid and renegotiable, so too is subjectivity which must always be understood within the configuration of discourses available under the constraints of a particular socio-historical moment.⁸

These theoretical insights present an alternative to the epistemologically troublesome accounts of the New Look that claim to speak for 'women' as a totality. They suggest an examination of the available discursive resources that women could engage and modify as they expressed their sentiments about the new fashion and contemporary constructions of femininity. These discourses were then available for use by other women who could, in turn, use them to embrace, resist or openly challenge prescriptions about fashion, beauty, femininity and consumption when they negotiated their own responses. In this way, a differentiated and shifting set of communicated meanings were made available as resources that could be combined with women's own experiences of the 1940s in the continuing negotiation of female subjectivity. In the following discussion, I examine some of the discursive positions expressed, utilized and modified by women as they wrote about the New Look.

THE NEW LOOK, EMBRACE AND RESISTANCE

Was he mad, this man? Was he making fun of women? How,
dressed in 'that thing', could they come and go, live or anything?
(Chanel, cited in Evans and Thornton, 1989: 30)

In 1954 rival designer Gabrielle ('Coco') Chanel poured scorn upon Dior's New Look, regarding it as a ludicrous restraint upon women's mobility. However, most of the recent international academic literature on the New

Look argues that the style was welcomed, if perhaps a little belatedly, although it represented a return to a more traditional form of femininity. According to this analysis, the Look was embraced as a bearer of style and glamour in the postwar years where rationing and shortages of many commodities had left a population weary and in need of some luxuriousness and elegance (Maynard, 1995; McNeil, 1993; Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 2000).

There were certainly clothing shortages in New Zealand too, some of which persisted until 1948 and 1949 when the New Look emerged here. These were sometimes greeted with annoyance, with the NZWW editorializing that 'one seems to spend endless hours wandering from shop to shop only to finish up with absolutely nothing' (1948h: 1). Undoubtedly, for some, the New Look styles did represent a move forward from wartime austerity and towards a more glamorous femininity (McKergow, 2000: 177). As the writer of one letter to the NZWW expressed it, 'we hear a lot about a grand "New World", and I think a "New Look" is one of the first requirements' ('Twenty-six', 1948f: 26). Clothing shortages formed a focus for disquiet, including among those who sought for themselves bodily constraint:

I have read on numerous occasions about the lace-up waist corset required to reduce the waist circumference . . . I have seen photographs of Australian women wearing these foundations and hope the day is near when I, too, will be 'laced to the limit'. ('Staysie Maisie', NZT, 1948g: 16)

What is wanted in New Zealand to make the New Look a success are suitable accessories, etc., to be worn with same . . . it is impossible to buy shoes with very high slender heels which were so easily obtainable before the war when shoes were imported. . . . Also it is impossible to buy a suitable foundation garment in our shops today at any price, which will give the wearer lines to really show the New Look clothes to advantage. Without these two items it will never be a success. ('Miss Modern', NZT, 1948f: 16)

I, too, have tried to purchase well-boned, small-waisted corsets, only to be told they are not being made or not in stock . . . At one time we used to be able to buy plenty of shoes in Wellington with heels 4 in. high, but they are not to be had today. . . . Too long we women have just taken what could be bought and let it go at that. Let us make it a new look in a big way. ('High Heels Ever', NZT, 1948d: 16)

These texts do embrace the New Look as a bearer of a new glamour following the war. Like 'Staysie Maisie' and 'Miss Modern', 'High Heels Ever' sought the transformation promised by the Look. However a form of resistance entered her text, with the complaint that women were suffering the impositions of the (implicitly male) powers that be. Her suggestion that 'we women have just taken what could be bought and let it go at that' interwove a desire for a new style for a new age with the contemporary notion that women had become 'pack horses' or 'beasts of burden', bearing the brunt of postwar shortages. The government was sometimes an explicit focus for dissatisfaction, with one writer levelling criticism at Walter Nash, the government Minister in charge of import restrictions. She suggested that Nash's top priority was 'defending his import restrictions' ('Bellbird', NZWW, 1949c: 5).⁹ The burdened woman trope seems to have been widespread in public discussions of domestic life. For example, a meeting at which frustrated Canterbury housewives aired their dissatisfaction with the sizing and quality of the available clothing was reported under the headline 'Housewives have had it!' (NZWW, 1948b: 6–7).¹⁰

The embrace of high-heeled glamour contained a resistance to women's postwar situation, which perhaps reflected a conflict between expectations of women's attractiveness and the means available to meet such expectations. 'Bellbird' argued that women were burdened not only by restrictions, but also by an industry which did not take account of the diversity of women's body shapes:

It is the tall woman, and the older woman, with broadening figure who find a difficulty in fitting themselves with any sort of garment. Makers of O.S. garments consider that all O.S. figures have an O.S. bust. If one does not, then the garment hangs ludicrously in front. ('Bellbird', NZWW, 1949c: 5)

While the New Look was feted by some as a harbinger of postwar style and glamour, others regarded it as absurd or even ominous. There were those who saw the long New Look skirts as a waste of fabric 'at a time when manpower and womanpower is urgently needed for desperately important things' ('A.L.', NZWW, 1948i: 44). Another writer is short on specific reasons for her opposition, but regarded the fashion as:

. . . one of the most absurd fashions ever to reach this country. Why cannot women be satisfied with simple skirts and jerseys, and plain frocks instead of calf-length skirts, etc? What will we be doing next?' ('Bunnythorpe Bunny', NZT, 1948e: 16)

M.F. Kaye, who submitted the following opinion piece to the *NZ Home Journal*, regarded the New Look as an ominous sign of a return to a past which included frail, swooning women. Under the title 'Fashion: a symbol', she wrote:

Many of us will be relieved to step into place again; to feel that after years of appearing outwardly desexed – flattened from every conceivable angle, trousered, arrogant, striding through the war period drunk with our freedom, the eternal feminine shall shine forth. . . . For the fashion experts have come to the rescue, and the picture they have presented is a charming one. We must not let them down. Bosoms must blossom, ankles just peep; petticoats must rustle, hair must go up; a beauty spot on the cheek perhaps, and a down dropped glance. If you are tall you may float along; if not, you may be coy – even simper – step upon a chair and shriek at a mouse; even indulge in an attack of the vapours – if you find time! (Kaye, 1949: 17)

Kaye's protest against the reimposition of an ostensibly 'eternal feminine' was heavily ironized, yet it provided a clear elucidation of the links between the female body and the social body in the years following a war which involved increased women's workforce participation, with some women doing jobs previously reserved for men. Body and social status were clearly linked in Kaye's question:

. . . are we afraid that our last decade of trousered aggressiveness may revert to just dignity; or that we may actually grow bosoms and hips again – in fact just step back to our ordained place a pace or two behind the male? (p. 17)

This text forcefully contrasted the progresses of 'trousered freedom' with the spectre of a regression to Victorian ankle fetishes and the hysterical personality with its tremors and faints (Bordo, 1993: 169). Irony and ridicule provided one means for resisting the reimposition of fashions deemed suitable for those stepping back into their 'ordained place'.

However, the New Look and signifiers of femininity were not always conflated and caricatured in this way. Often particular feminine signs were retained and valued even when the New Look was itself resisted. One NZHJ reader rejected the New Look's longer-length skirt on the grounds that it was not 'flattering' for her 'average' figure:

How many of us admire the new length and feel it flatters the average figure? Perhaps it will be the courage of necessity that

will cause many of us to retain the old and more flattering hemline. Am I supported by others in my views? ('Economy', NZHJ, 1948a: 27)

This reader found that the New Look did not 'flatter' her figure, and she possessed no desire to discipline and remake her body in the manner suggested by the advertisers. The term 'average figure' indicates that 'Economy' regarded the New Look as unrealistic in demanding a particularly slim body. While she implied feeling that a 'new' fashion was somehow more desirable than the 'old', her existing body shape impelled the 'old' as a matter of necessity.

Elsewhere the New Look was regarded as stylistically inferior, a 'dowdy' fashion which could be contrasted with 'pretty' clothing:

On looking at pictures taken of 'Miss New Zealand' in London, I can only say that if the clothes she wears are the 'new look', it is the most dowdy and ugly style I have seen yet. My mother wore clothes like that 35 years ago . . . How much nicer she would look in a pretty dance frock with a graceful floor-length skirt. ('Disgusted 21', NZT, 1948b: 16)

This affirmation of 'prettiness' drew upon particular notions of femininity as a resource in order to oppose the New Look, while reinscribing the importance of femininity per se through an appeal to prettiness and gracefulness. This text also hints at a resistance to a return to a prior generation's enactment of femininity: an (albeit unspecified) form of progress is preferred over a return to past images of womanhood. The interweaving of 'prettiness' and resistance repeats a similar formulation evident during the New Zealand dress reform movement of the mid-1890s. The burdensome corset and heavy skirt were to be dispensed with in favour of 'a nicely fitting knicker suit for work and exercise' designed by the president of the NZ Rational Dress Association (Malthus, 1993: 255). The new ensemble was described by the Association as 'pretty and not at all masculine looking', thus accepting contemporary commentators' calls for a retention of 'the grace of female attire' while offering a way for women to relieve themselves of their burdensome clothing (p. 256). In this way, feminist resistance to disciplined and docile bodies took place from within discourses of femininity rather than in opposition to them (Birmingham Feminist History Group, 1979). Both accommodation and resistance to historically specific constructions of 'woman' overlapped here.

This overlapping occurred slightly differently in the following example.

The notion that the postwar woman should strive to be attractive for the war-weary husband was accepted in one sense, but it was inflected so that a woman's true desirability resulted from her good sense in refusing to discipline her body in unhealthy ways:

We don't wear iron or steel or wooden corsets any longer, thank goodness, and we aren't laced up in the middle like a wasp. . . . The modern man should, in fact, think himself very lucky to have such a sensible wife! ('Biddy', NZHJ, 1949a: 22)

Like 'Disgusted 21' (NZT, 1948b), 'Biddy' (NZHJ, 1949a) invoked the symbolic opposition between an outdated past and a progressive future. The woman of the 1940s cast off the corsets of her predecessors, just as she no longer wore 'curled and decorated wigs, so elaborate that mice could build nests in them unnoticed. . . . We have long since passed the day when to bathe oneself or one's clothes was considered crazy' (p. 22).

Constructions of the healthy body loomed large in this account, with 'Biddy' (NZHJ, 1949a) suggesting that 'for the first time in seven centuries our fashions are good for the health' (p. 22). Appeals to health constituted another linguistic resource for resisting the New Look. Discourses of health had long provided a means of resisting corsets and other constricting clothing (Forty, 1986: 174). One writer responded to 'Miss Modern' (NZT, 1948f), whose desires for high-heeled shoes were outlined earlier, with dire warnings about their health effects:

If 'Miss Modern (1948)' (Wanganui) really wants to wear shoes with slender heels of four inches over in height, then she will end up being 'Miss Very Sorry (1968)'. This young woman should realise that there are many crippled middle-aged women in New Zealand attending chiropodists, the direct result of wearing high-heeled shoes. . . . Shoes should fulfil nature's laws in having the body weight supported through the heels, instead of the toes. (Smith, 1948: 16)

In Smith's letter, medical knowledge ('the heels, instead of the toes') was employed in a straightforward manner to legitimate the opposition being voiced. Appeals to the power of medical discourse were used similarly during 19th-century campaigns for dress reform (Malthus, 1989). Use of discourses of health could however be somewhat more contradictory in respect of disciplinary and normalizing power. A writer to NZT stated that:

In my opinion, this 'new look' should be discarded. Women should stop to think what effect tight stays and pinched-in waists

Sensible slimming in practice



A previous announcement outlined the rules to be observed in reducing obesity. Here are suggestions as to how these rules can be put into practice in the daily meals.

Butter for the day:—N.Z.'s ration allowance.
Milk for the day:—1 pint with the cream poured off.

Breakfast: A serving of fruit raw, or stewed without sugar; An egg when available, or a serving of fish (not fried), or a rasher of lean bacon with tomatoes; 1-2 thin slices of bread or toast (preferably wholemeal) with a little butter (no marmalade, honey, etc.); A cup of tea or coffee (not coffee essence)—no sugar added.



Mid-Morning: Cup of tea, coffee, marmite, or bovril and a serving of fruit if hungry, but no biscuits, bread and butter or cake.

Lunch or Tea: A salad, which may consist of lettuce, cabbage, celery, cucumber, tomato, radish, onion, beetroot, carrot, peas, herbs, plus egg and cheese or cold meat. Vinegar may be used on the salad but no salad dressing, or fish steamed, or grilled or baked with tomato or onion, stewed rabbit or a lean chop, grilled kidney or steak or egg boiled, poached, scrambled or as an omelette, 1-2 thin slices of bread (preferably wholemeal) with a little butter, but no jam, honey, etc. Tea or coffee and fresh fruit as for breakfast.



Mid-Afternoon: Cup of tea (no sugar), with nothing to eat.

Dinner: Clear soup if desired, but no thickened soups such as barley broth; A large serving of lean meat, e.g., mutton, beef, rabbit, fish (not fried), liver, chicken, no thickened gravy or sauce; A large serving of a green vegetable or tomato; An average serving of a root vegetable (carrot, onion, pumpkin, leeks, or turnip); 1 medium potato (not roasted); Fruit raw or stewed without sugar, or a milk jelly, junket, egg custard or spanish cream (no sugar) made from the day's milk allowance; Glass of water or cup of coffee (no sugar).



Supper: Glass of milk or cup of tea or coffee (no sugar).

Foods may be sweetened with saccharin if desired.

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Figure 4: 'Sensible Slimming in Practice', *New Zealand Home Journal*, 10 September 1948, p. 25. © The Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand

will have on their children, or is the idea that in future women will not bear children? I, for one, do not propose to accept the new look. I want my children to be happy and healthy, not nervous deformed wrecks. ('Tangerine', NZT, 1948h: 16)¹¹

The letter from 'Tangerine' resists the distorting body discipline intrinsic to the New Look by employing a discourse on nervousness which resonates with the image of the nervous woman, which since the 1890s had been a mainstay of patriarchal psychiatry (Showalter, 1987). Such a discourse proved useful for resisting the New Look although unwittingly reproducing psychiatry's normalizing power (cf. Sawicki, 1991: 102). In this sense, the use of claims about nervousness to resist the New Look constituted a reverse discourse, in which those disqualified through a particular discourse were able to use that discourse in order to argue for legitimacy (Foucault, 1990: 101).

The ironies surrounding discourses of health and the New Look are intensified by the fact that the fashion appears in a public service advertisement issued by the Department of Health titled 'Sensible Slimming in Practice' (Department of Health, 1948: 25), see Figure 4. This was one of a series of advertisements that attempted to create a 'healthy' populace; another outlined in minute detail which items were to be included in children's school lunchboxes in order to ensure a balanced diet. The Department's slimming advertisement promised a transition from a woman's existing, implicitly overweight, body size to a slim figure that could model the latest New Look ensemble, should she follow the instructions. The Health Department and the undergarment manufacturers shared the conviction that the New Look involved a project of body reconstruction for which the latest fashion was the prize. While some of the state's subjects used discourses of health to resist the New Look, the state somewhat ironically used the New Look to promote its health campaign. Here, the state operated superstructurally, as Foucault suggests it is able to, operating upon those subjects who have already been constituted and disciplined through the capillary operation of power (Faith, 1994). The state's public health strategy operated by appealing to female subjects who were assumed to be preparing to discipline their own bodies in order to satisfy their desire for the New Look. Unfortunately for the Department of Health, however, women did not always make such preparation for the consolidation of disciplinary strategies upon the body.

Despite the intellectual representations of 1940s New Zealand as a conformist society characterized by rigid gender roles, some incitements to

individuality were made available. The NZHJ editorialized: 'whether or not you favour the New Look or any other dictate of fashion, you can always accentuate your individuality by the careful choice of the clothes you wear' (1948c: 7). One writer to NZT regarded the New Look as a concoction of designers and dress shops which should be resisted in the name of freedom:

We may let our skirts down an inch or two, but let us not accept the dictation of the new lookers and allow ourselves to become figures of fun to suit trade-purpose people. Let New Zealand women rally round the flag of freedom in dress. ('Anti-new Look', NZT, 1948a: 16)

Individuality here offers a noble escape from bodily discipline as well as, implicitly, other postwar expectations to which women were subject.

CONCLUSION: FASHION, RESISTANCE AND PLEASURE

As these texts demonstrate, women deployed a range of discursive positions in response to the emergent fashions of the New Look. Some desired the opportunity to purchase a range of accessories, such as high-heeled shoes, which would enhance the new fashion and enable the wearer to be 'laced to the limit'. Clearly, for some the New Look represented both a pleasurable bodily discipline and an escape from the shortages of wartime – although lingering rationing and import controls made achieving the New Look difficult. Others were more ambivalent, seeing the New Look as another imposition upon women who were finding it difficult enough to find comfortable, wearable, 'pretty' – and, ironically, 'feminine' – clothes in the lingering postwar shadow of clothing shortages. Still others regarded the fashion itself as a harbinger of forms of femininity that belonged to former generations and needed to be surpassed in the name of progress. These women utilized discourses of health, new possibilities for women, or 'freedom' from the contrivances of dress designers to express their resistance to the New Look and/or the body discipline it required.

These resistances took place at various levels and in different combinations. It seems likely that there was a New Zealand equivalent to the hybridizing and sampling of the New Look which Partington (1992) noted for British working class women. The NZWW's pattern service showed readers images for the possibilities offered by 'renovating' existing clothing to give it a 'New Look' although, as in Partington's examples, the dresses displayed featured buttoned waistbands rather than boning and ironically they appeared cut to the 'old' length rather than the 'new' (NZWW, 1948j: 42).

Insofar as the New Look signified wasp waists, the 'new length', boning, stiffening, bodily discipline and restriction, the range of forms of resistance displayed towards it are significant. Earlier I suggested that some academic analysis of the fashion has privileged the concept of pleasure over an analysis of domination. This has sometimes given rise to the implication that the New Look was unproblematic for women because it could be understood as pleasurable. However, this is a somewhat rigid framing of the opposition between domination and resistance, which can lead to perhaps unintended consequences within writing on gender and consumption.

It has tended to be implied that, since some women found pleasure in the New Look, all women should do so. Wilson (1980: 84), for example, suggests somewhat disparagingly that those 'labour movement women' who campaigned against the style 'seemed afraid of its sexiness'. The privileging of pleasure has the unfortunate result of suggesting that those who opposed aspects of the New Look for any reason were grim promoters of postwar austerity, puritans who opposed expressions of women's sexuality, or women who were unnecessarily 'anxious' about the style. In this vein, Maynard (1995) writes that women 'consumers' were 'anxious' about the implications of the Look, while officials 'moralized' about waste and 'denounced' the fashion's 'reactionary nature' (p. 45).

Although the emphasis on pleasure arose partly as a means of recognizing women's agency in the face of structural inequalities, in this case, it has ironically served quite contrary ends by denying such agency. While such an emphasis permits an acknowledgement that those who embraced the New Look were no dupes of the social push towards a domesticated femininity, it consigns others to the abject categories of 'the puritan' or 'the anxious'. Yet those whose letters appear in the newspapers or magazines of the time opposing the New Look were, I suggest, neither puritanical nor 'anxious', awaiting enlightenment about the pleasures of the new fashion. Instead, they engaged in active resistance to a fashion they understood as in some way regressive, whether this was, in terms of body discipline, an attempt to reconstruct a traditional femininity, a diversion from a more simple 'prettiness', or a dubious concoction of marketing experts who sought to dictate fashions to women, thus limiting their 'freedom'.

The discourses of resistance explored in this essay have tended to be eclipsed by the current framing of the debate over whether the New Look – and consumption practices more generally – support or challenge forms of domination. This framing of consumption and resistance appears to preclude the possibility that a particular form of consumption may *itself* constitute a target for resistance in a particular historical moment and social

context. We are not limited to two possibilities: we need not understand the New Look as *either* a form of feminine false consciousness *or* a source of pleasurable resistance (to postwar austerity, for example). Instead, the New Look can be interpreted as a phenomenon that can be resisted if and when experienced as disciplinary and normalizing. The body is a site not only of pleasure or forbearance, but also of accommodation or resistance to the inscriptions of the social order.

If the Look was intended to lure women into compliance with a tightly bound femininity symbolized by the tightly disciplined female body, it opened up spaces for quite the opposite: a questioning of the body images available to women and their wider social significance. Paradoxically, the New Look provided a focus for resistance to particular constructions of femininity and female bodies, at the same time as reasserting a more traditional femininity accompanied by high levels of body discipline for women. Where this resistance was voiced, it provided linguistic resources that other women could take up and blend with their experiences to create new understandings of themselves and their lives.

Acknowledgements

The development of this paper has greatly benefited from the helpful input of Glenys Barker, Kerry Brickell, Katie Pickles, Megan Woods and Ben Taylor. I would also like to thank Miles Fairburn for his support during my tenure as Postdoctoral Fellow at Canterbury University, during which time this paper was written. Thanks are also due to the anonymous reviewers for their helpful suggestions.

Notes

1. Useful discussions of these shifts can be found in Campbell (1995), Cross (1993), Kellner (1983) and Miller (1987).
2. These earlier approaches are exemplified by May (1988).
3. In New Zealand, married women's workforce participation continued to increase after the war, as it did in the UK and Canada (Nolan, 2000: 206; Strong-Boag, 1991: 479; Wilson, 1980: 188).
4. Adler appears to have first used this term in an address to the Vienna Society in 1911 (Garber, 1992: note 399).
5. For further accounts of women's experiences of the postwar years in New Zealand, see May (1989, 1992).
6. Useful collections of feminist appropriations of Foucault include Diamond and Quinby (1988), Hekman (1996) and Ramazanoglu (1993).
7. Turim (1990) examines the US transmogrification of the New Look into the 'Sweetheart Line', exemplified by the image of the bride, but her emphasis is on the commercial construction of images of femininity rather than women's own engagement with the New Look.
8. De Lauretis's position, like that of Lemke, posits neither determinism by forces

cultural or historical, nor an agency unmediated by said forces. The construction of subjectivity is a reflexive process where both agency and social forces inform one another within a historical context. Such a position is therefore neither wholly 'structuralist' nor 'culturalist' (Pickering, 1997: 162). The social subject weaves together accounts of the social and the self on an everyday basis within a mediating context, and so these accounts are structurally mediated but not structurally determined.

9. Nash was also criticized by the parliamentary National party opposition for granting insufficient import licenses for women's fashions. One commentator in National's newspaper *Freedom* dubbed the necessary not-quite-New-Look compromise 'the Nash Look' (Cunningham, 1949: 2). NZT labelled Nash the 'Dictator of N.Z. Fashion' (1949b: 26).
10. The Housewives' Associations provided opportunities for women to 'play [a part] in the affairs of this country' while seeking collective redress for domestic concerns (NZWW, 1948k: 1). Sometimes these concerns formed a focus for dissatisfaction with domesticity itself. One contributor to *NZ Woman's Weekly* writes about striving for mental stimulation through reading and writing, but feeling too exhausted by the burdens of housework:

I reckoned without the 'tradition' which, with marriage and maternity, enslaves the average New Zealand woman. . . . Physical weariness begets mental laziness, my vitality is spent and the tide of my creative urge has ebbed. It is easier to mend socks now than write. Simpler to iron shirts than read Proust . . . to the average woman it is as though she were given a tantalizing glimpse of what she might do, then barricaded into a pokey house with a set of inadequate tools and an endless variety of tasks. (Spencer, 1948: 9, 45)

11. Some men shared a similar view, with the male managing director of a 'leading lingerie house' describing as 'grotesque' some of the sketches of New Look designs he had seen (NZT, 1948c: 22).

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