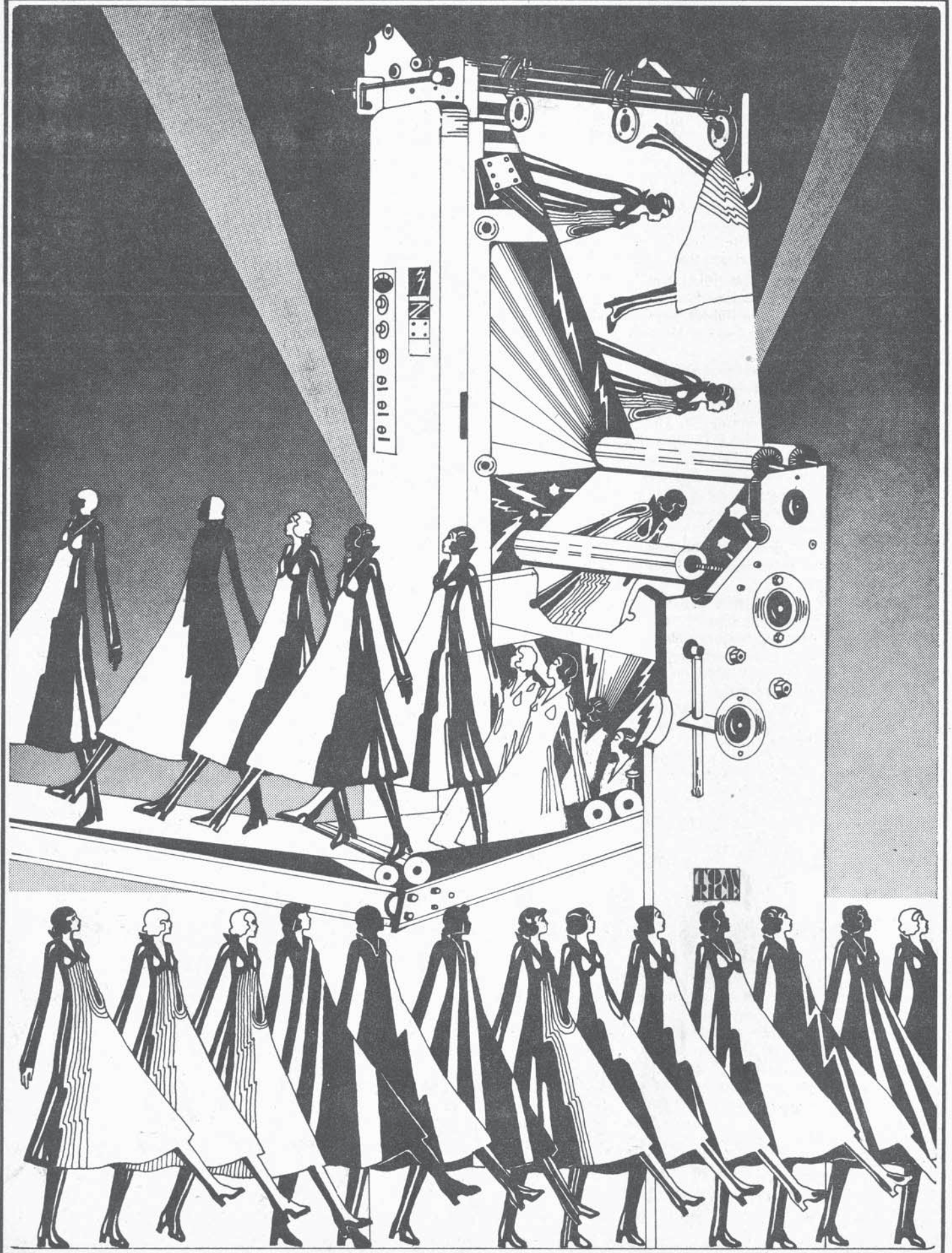


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FASHION FASCISM

The Politics of Midi

A special RAGS report

Fascism starts at home, and especially in the world of Big Fashion. It is, by now, pretty clear that few *saleswomen* in the major stores would have chosen Midi for themselves — had the style not been imposed upon them. And this is precisely what has happened.

Through "educational" meetings for sales staffs starting this spring; through special employee discounts (50 percent off, usually) on Midi prices; through informal pressure and formal edicts (at Bonwit's, New York, Philadelphia and Chicago; at Carson Pirie Scott, Chicago; at Joseph Magnin's, San Francisco; at Jackson Graves, Minneapolis, and elsewhere) Big Fashion has dictated that its own sales people not only sell 'em, but wear 'em, too.

Despite all this—because of it, maybe—the saleswomen themselves (women who *believe* in Big Fashion) are not convinced of Midi.

August 3rd was the day the Midi became the law of the store at Bonwit's. The New York saleswomen were given the option of wearing either Midi or pantsuits. No minis. Half of them chose pantsuits—though it was understood that they were *supposed* to be in Midis, *really*.

At Bonwit's in Chicago — which has got 90 to 95 percent Midi on its racks—RAGS correspondent Ingeborg Day discovered that the store is un-

willing even to allow its employees to speak their mind about Midi. Minutes after returning home from interviews with Bonwit's saleswomen, Ingeborg received a phone call from the store's public relations woman, Martha Needham, who told her that company policy forbade sales personnel from speaking with the press.

Earlier, in the Designer Salon, second floor, a gray-haired and amiable Bonwit's saleslady had said: "All our fall fashions are Midi. Now, I didn't like minis and I don't like Midis, but don't quote that."

"We were all told to cover our knees and offered a liberal discount on Midi stock."

No, she hadn't bought any. "I just brought all my old things in and had my hems dropped. Quite a few of our customers are doing that, too."

At Bonwit's S'fari Room, a very pretty blond saleswoman, about 25, wearing a mini-skirt, said she had nothing to tell the press, except that she loves the Midi.

"But I wouldn't tell you if I didn't," she said, and *why* she wouldn't is illuminating. "The little Joe who works for Detroit and makes his living off it shouldn't say Fords are lousy. What I always say is *like it or get out*. That's what I feel about the fashions this store is promoting. I want to be loyal."

Then why was she wearing a mini that day?

"All my Midis happen to be at the cleaners."

A 21-year-old salesgirl on the third floor said, "I'm wearing Midi and I love it." She had a pantsuit on.

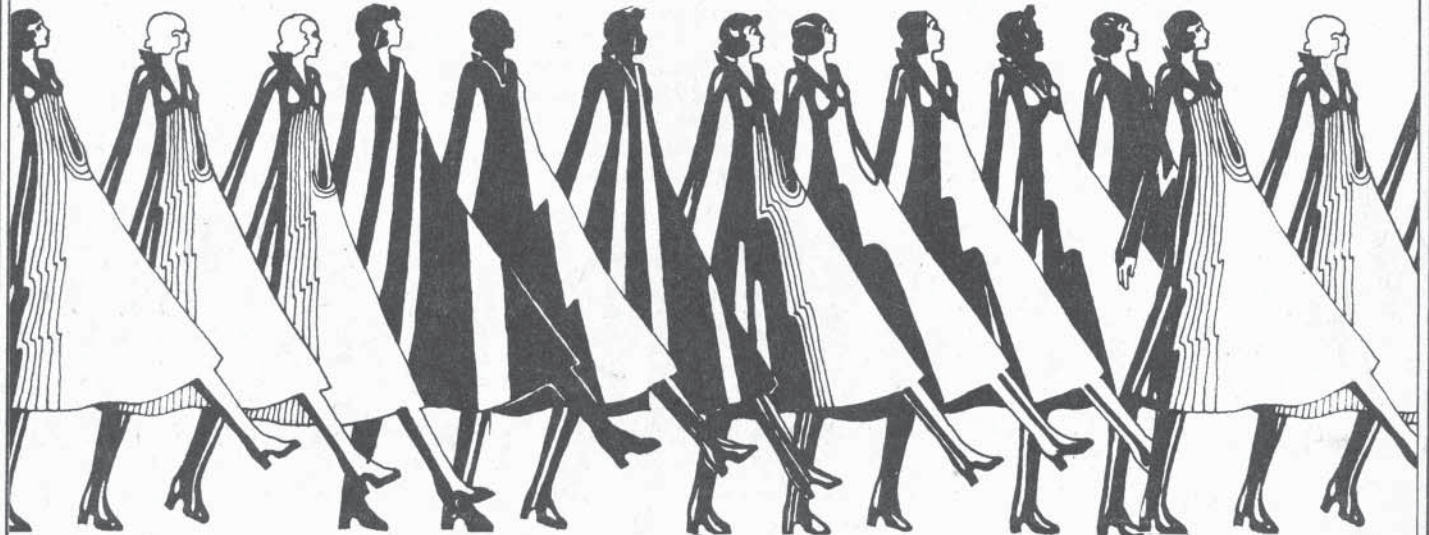
Asked how men react to Midi, she said: "I'm getting very sad reactions from men, but they get used to it. Eventually, men get around to everything. For evening, I'll stick to mini, no matter what the store says."

Reactions ran stronger yet in San Francisco, where RAGS correspondent Amie Hill learned from a 30ish clerk at the Emporium (one of the city's largest department stores) that "people will be wearing them this year, but not much longer. They'll be out of style quick."

No Midis on Emporium saleswomen.

In the store's Collegienne Shop, one middle-aged saleswoman admitted that she "wouldn't wear them. They make my legs look awful. I'd have to wear boots." Opening up, she confided "people aren't going to wear that many, but we got a hard-headed boss. We tried to tell her, but no, she had to go and order all kinds of them." She estimated about 50 percent of her department's stock would be long when all orders were filled.

Joseph Magnin's has taken the big plunge and gone almost totally Midi—95 percent on one floor, 85 percent on two others. JM's windows are exclusively Midi, with the legend: "Enter JM and Step into a New Era!"



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Several slinky attractive young *Made-moiselle*-type salesgirls were wearing Midi skirts or dresses, not, they hastened to explain, because they were told to, but "just because we think they're terrific!" Older saleswomen didn't look so happy, but were wearing Midis, almost to a man. "You have to be brave. Start out wearing them with boots."

Overheard in a JM dressing room: "Yvonne, if you think about whether you like it or not, you'll never buy it. Let's just take it and get out of here."

In the Macy's (San Francisco) Young Fashions department, a conversation with *A* (older saleswoman) and *B* (scarcely out of her teens) . . .

A: I won't wear them unless I'm forced to—if the store says I have to or there's just nothing else on the racks to wear.

B: I think they're just awful, but I'm not supposed to say so.

A: I went through that long-skirt business after the war and I don't want to again. I've still got leftover "Midis" hanging in the back of my closet.

B: As far as I can see, the young people just aren't buying them, and that's who decides what goes.

A: At least it's wonderful for the tall girls—now they can find dresses that are long enough.

Sign on the wall:

MIDI MIDI MIDI
MIDI MIDI MIDI
MIDI MIDI MIDI

I. Magnin's (San Francisco) slogan is "It's Longer — It's Right," and they have also gone from 75 to 85 percent Midi. All is not harmony, however. One rebel saleswoman in her forties hissed: "If the women in this country let the designers and stores do this to them, they're sick and crazy and stupid!"

Question to a male employee: Do you like the Midi?

Of course I do!

Really?

Actually, I don't much.

One tactic, according to a sports-wear salesgirl, is to try to sell a customer on gaucho pants, or a long tunic and slacks, and hope she'll build up the courage to come back for the real thing.

Whether I. Magnin's has told its saleswomen to go Midi is a deep, dark secret. "Would you wear one?" we asked a middle-aged short-skirted saleslady. "Starting next week, we'll all be wearing them here," she said. Had the store told them to? "We just all decided to be stylish."

Overheard by a three-way mirror, Midi-wearing customer to salesday: "PLEASE tell me if it looks okay. I certainly can't tell."

Well, the answer is that on some women Midi looks okay and on some it does not. A great *effect* for now and then: the long silhouette, a great tailored sweep of fabric from neck to boots. Very dramatic, sparingly employed. A change of pace. *Part* of the wardrobe. But *not* the whole god-damn closetful. You should be able to go to the store and find a *selection*. Variety. When all they've got to show you is Midi, and all they've got to tell you is *Midi or else*, that's fascism.

But the saleswomen cannot tell their customers they ought to pick up *one* Midi, because their bosses haven't left them that option. There is no alternative. You want a mini? Tough luck, we ain't got none. When stores stock 75 and 85 and 95 percent Midi—these figures are typical at most high fashion stores—it means that the remaining 25 or 15 or five percent is a combination of gauchos and pantsuits and maxis. Seldom more than one or two percent mini, the merest handful. More often, none.

How did they kill mini?

On many fronts, almost as if it was planned by the Mafia.

Down in Dallas, Nieman-Marcus president Stanley Marcus held a July press conference to declare the micro mini dead. He then went on to hedge his bet by expounding the N-M theory of "Becomingness." Which is to say

With true American initiative, organized, acronymical resistance to the Great Midi Conspiracy has sprung up around the land. In Washington, it's FADD (Fight Against Designer Dictatorship) while New York has GAMS (Girls/Guys Against More Skirt). GAMS has a five-point program for individual action against the Midi: (1) Avoid patronizing stores which don't carry the mini; (2) Freely and frequently voice your discontent over the Midi and suggest to stores which carry both that you would rather wear last year's mini than this year's Midi; (3) Don't purchase a Midi and go home and cut it off, because the store will just chalk up another sale for the Midi and your protest will go unheeded; (4) If you can't find a mini to buy, make one; (5) Don't let anyone convince you that wearing a mini is out of style. Fashion which does not serve the people is bullshit.

that his store will stock a variety of lengths, and take your pick. He called 1970 an "election year" when women would "go to the polls" to decide what length they want, a matter no designer or store should dictate to them. Just so long as they don't vote mini, because mini's off the ballot.

Those stores that allow women freedom of choice, by offering a selection of mini-Midi-maxi styles, face wither-



ing abuse from designers and Big Fashion leaders (lots of whom will face bankruptcy if Midi flops, it should be noted).

For instance, Mildred Custin, ex-president of Bonwit's, now a consultant, raised hell with buyers who held off on summer purchases, unsure where the hemline was at. "This wait-and-see attitude is contrary to the rules of the fashion business," she said. "Change has always been regarded as the essence of fashion. Change has always been a challenge to other retailers' ingenuity for presentation and promotion. If the women's apparel industry is in jeopardy—and it is—stores must assume a lion's share of the blame. After all, the Midi is the first major change in fashion direction in many years. Stores should welcome this business."

Even if *this business* turns out to be a load of merchandise they cannot sell?

And what's *new* about a style that has been the rule in Paris for nearly two years? That was called the New Look in 1947? All that's new is that Big Fashion has decided to push it.

Why did that happen? How did it come about?

Catherine Court, a RAGS correspondent in New York, offers this analysis:

An unprecedented hysteria accompanied the Midi from its conception, and gave it a renown out of all proportion to its entirely mercenary significance. It did not matter to the fashion industry that the mini skirt had become a symbol of a generation for young women in the 60's. The industry's decision was that the mini had lived too long. As a miniature skirt, the mini required only a minimum of material and fabric sales were not impressive. The mini length looked unbalanced and ridiculous with a hat. Millinery sales had gone into a sharp decline, and some stores were considering eliminating the hats department altogether. Shoe design had become static and uninspired as the

mini years wore on. There was only so much that could be done to the casual low-heeled shoe that complimented the mini skirt. Shoes sales everywhere were down. The glove industry simply twiddled its thumbs while the supposed mini "fad" wore on.

At the end of the 60's the fashion mongers were feeling skinny and scared. The industry needed new economic life.

And so Paris created le Midi. And in retail circles there was light where once there had been darkness. *Women's Wear Daily* combined with the great department stores and entire American market to proclaim: Let there be no more mini skirts.

The presses of the fashion industry began mobilizing ruthlessly. It was not their concern to enhance the quality of life and beauty. Women must wear the Midi, as they had all other fashions. The older among them might even be expected to like a style that made every wearer look years older. *Women's Wear Daily* began an attack on the mini skirt that continues today. The *longuette*—their name for Midi—had ushered in a new era of femininity in fashion, they explained. Was there ever anything attractive about a bony knee?

On June 25 *Women's Wear* ran on its front page 'The Last of the Red Hot Minis.' Its editors missed completely the point of the wearer's short white dress, with long white knee socks. It was actually a safari costume. However, *Women's Wear* is convinced that the girl who still dresses in mini is exercising a taste for camp. They predicted that Red Hot Mini would be first in the *longuette* come fall.

The truth is not what makes *Women's Wear Daily* rich. Every day it hits the newsstands with some sharp new promotional angle on the Midi, designed to make sales soar, and humiliate any girl who does not conform to the new fashion.

Women's Wear doesn't actually ap-

ply the thumbscrews directly on the consumer the way the fashion magazines do. They function rather as a pipeline—as a *ticker tape*, in fact—to Big Fashion: the designers and buyers and manufacturers. Since *Women's Wear* is primarily a trade paper, these people mistake its attempts at trend-making for reality. A confusion of fantasy and fact. The power of *Women's Wear* is not that their fantasies and power trips are *better* or *worse* than any other fashion publication. The power of *Women's Wear* is that Big Fashion reads the paper's editorializing (as distinct from its *news coverage*) as blueprints toward Big Profits, and acts accordingly.

Thus, *Women's Wear* serves up Midi under the fractured-French title *longuette*, and Big Fashion snaps it up, hook line and sinker. And if you want to eat what Big Fashion and *Women's Wear* eat, you will, too.

Jackie Onassis and Lee Radziwill were photographed at the height of Midi hysteria trundling off to Maximilian's in short coats to be measured for new mink *longuettes*. *Harper's Bazaar* was caught short by WWD and the fashion industry in their February issue: it became known that they had cropped at mid-high many of their skirt photographs to make the length ambiguous.

Claire M. Lang, in her Merchandising Report, told merchandisers that the best way to hustle those goods was to *bluff it out*, not to cop to any confusion. "Probably the *best overall statement made by any store*," she wrote (emphasis here), "with regard to length—and Lord knows there have been many was the ad run by Ohrbach's in the Sunday *New York Times* which simply and irrevocably said: 'The Knee is Dead.' This statement brought over three thousand women into the store and I feel it settled the entire question, making the customer feel that most of her present wardrobe is 'dead.'"

Stiff upper lip or not, the hype was just too strong, and *Women's Wear*



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was compelled to show at least the tip of the iceberg of anti-Midi reaction in its own Letters section, in mid-August:

Sir:
I want to take this opportunity to express myself in reference to your all out promotion of the Longuette fashion. In my opinion our customers have shown very little interest in same and, outside of a few Midi and maxi coats to the younger set, no one is going to be wearing them in our area. I think you are doing quite a disservice to the manufacturers and retailers by trying to promote a fashion that the customers are not ready for. I feel, as many others do, that this was a wrong time to promote a long fashion. Prices of the apparel are so abnormally high at this time in regular lengths, that a longer length which, of course, increases the price further, is very untimely.

I wish to add my protest to that of many others who feel that Women's Wear Daily has done a lot of harm in their persistent publicity of the Longuette fashion.

Leon Zwick
Zwick's Ladies Store
Herrin, Ill.

And:
Sir:

We have subscribed to WWD for many years. We will not renew our subscription when it expires.

How any newspaper can push the Longuette-look as you have, is beyond our comprehension. You are cramming this look down the throats of all women, much against their will.

The female body remains basically the same through the years. The pride of every woman is a good pair of legs, a trim waist and an appealing bustline.

How, then, can a fashion that would have been ugly and tasteless two years ago, suddenly become beautiful today?

If it is true that "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder," we suggest that

you see a good optometrist.

G.M. Katz
Universal Shirt Co.
Elizabeth, N.J.

The mini has always had a political character as a costume. At first the mini was *us against them*, youth against older people whose values they had grown to distrust more and more. Even after it had weathered the vulgarity and commercialism of Big Fashion, and graduated from style to costume, it retained political overtones. Because mini was something women had *chosen*, Big Fashion be damned. It was a statement for its wearers that they would wear what they wanted to wear. They would not be dictated to. The mini was first a poster, Marshall McLuhan pointed out in *Culture in Our Business*: to wear it was to proclaim that you are young and sensual and different from another generation.

The mini skirt is a declaration of difference. The Midi skirt is only a fashion stamp of sameness. It can never hope to achieve the meaning of the mini, and its pedigree is already suspect.

On June 17 *Women's Wear Daily* reported that in France: "The student revolutionaries hurl paper plates at The Establishment in their longuette put-ons." The Big Fashion Establishment sells to the older generation but not any longer to the younger generation; there is a new term among the young for consumer vultures with appetites for mink longuettes and six pairs of alligator shoes. These products of the consumer culture are Dinosaurs to the counter culture. They are regarded as evil.

The Midi has built-in obsolescence like the car styles put out by GM and Ford. Good for 18 months. Unlike GM's product, it doesn't even really work. As a full-time costume, Midi feels cumbersome and matronly. At a time when everyone wants power and freedom, Midi confines and constricts. Some fashion mongers are beginning to realize this now and

some are embarrassed at the PR build-up the Midi has been given. Leona Bowman, editor of *The Fashion Newsletter* advises the industry that it's "being anaesthetized into conservative thinking."

Those shops and designers who have remained closer to the street remain realistic about Midi. It's a fact of life to contend with, but not one worthy of the enormous gamble Big Fashion is taking on it.

In New York, RAGS correspondent K.T. Maclay spoke with Wayne Rogers, who is sole designer for GRANNY TAKES A KNIT, NO COMMENT, and OFF MY BACK. His holiday and resort line—which is an early trial for spring '71—is 80 percent Midi. He doesn't know if the Midi will sell either. His line will be "80 percent Midi for the first week . . ." then after that, if it doesn't move he'll get the scissors out and cut it down. The other 20 percent of his line runs to short dresses (marvelous looking costumey stuff) and jumpsuits.

Further along, K.T. stopped in at a lingerie store called Vanity Lane and asked one Mrs. Harris, who owns the shop, for a Midi slip.

"Are you crazy?" she said. "We can't afford to throw our money away. I had a slip to the knee and nobody would buy it . . . I asked the manufacturer to cut me some more deminis and he gave me an argument . . . But, demi-mini's are what's selling. We're waiting to see if the Midi takes hold. In the meantime the demi-minis are still selling like mad.

"You want a midi robe? I got one marked down way below wholesale."

After talking with dozens of people in The Industry in New York, you become aware that this is what they are telling you, when they speak in confidence:

"They're going to have to carry the Midis away in big trucks because nobody's going to buy them."

Keep on truckin', truckin' the night away . . .

