

FASHION FASCISM

An interview with MARSHALL McLUHAN:

MINI SKIRT TRIBALISM

by Catherine Court

Marshall McLuhan is a mini skirt watcher. Two years ago, while holding the Albert Schweitzer Chair at Fordham in New York, Dr. McLuhan christened the mini skirt "a return to ancient tribal traditions . . . not mere fashion." Early this year the Fashion Industry brought us The Midi Length that fell well below the kneecap and told us that The Knee was dead. In February, amidst the furor, I asked Marshall McLuhan if the mini skirt was on its way out. He scoffed: "The mini will never die. It's a tribal costume. It is Fashion that is dead." Later I asked Dr. McLuhan at the Centre for Culture and Technology in Toronto to expand his thesis of the miniskirt as a tribal costume.

McLuhan: The mini will never go out because it's a costume. It's like putting on the Easy Rider costume. The police are pigs because they are in uniform not costume. The motorcycle policeman, however, is not a pig, because he's in costume, and he's imitated by the young. The kids put on helmets, get on motorcycles and take to the open road. The kids today are not concerned about their appearance. Heavens no! They couldn't give a darn about how they look. What they want is power. You've got black power, red power, student power. In wearing the mini skirt, a tribal costume that began as a loincloth, the kids are actually putting on the power of the natural forces themselves.

Is that why kids wear suede, skins, teeth necklaces and so on?

Of course. There is no more dress. Only costumes. There are no more jobs — only roles. That's why people can't fit into organizations anymore. This is the reason for all the strikes around the world as jobs dissolve into roles. There is the same effect with dress. There is only one actual costume in dress — the evening dress.

Is part of the reason for the continuance of the mini skirt its practicality, its ease for dancing, for example?

No, not at all. The mini is simply worn as costume. A put on of tribal power. The kids couldn't give you a single reason why they wear it. The mini skirt is a corporate costume; kids, today, in putting on the mini skirt are in roles . . . not their private selves. When you are in a role you put on your audience, like Mae West who put on the role of the female impersonator, like Tiny Tim. . . .

Why did tribal man wear the short skirt?

There was no practical reason. It was purely ornamental. It was used to accentuate sexual facts, not to hide them.

In Greek times there were primitive cele-

brations in which the organs of generation were paraded after the dance to Dionysus. Was this a sexual celebration?

No, this was entirely a corporate ritual, not a private one.

You have said that the miniskirt is not sexy. Why?

The miniskirt isn't sexy. In tribal societies there was no such thing as sex. Sex was totally integrated into the rest of life. If you had used the word "sex" in those times, the people would not have known what you meant. John Donne was the first to use the word "sex", in our fragmented sense, in 1610. There is no sex left now in America. Hollywood and Hugh Hefner are finishing it off.

Is it significant that the miniskirt emerged in London, England and was first worn by the London dollies?

Oh, yes, it was very significant that the mini skirt emerged in England. The English are far more primitive people than the Americans. The cockneys, for example, have never been civilized. In fact, both the upper and lower class English are already tribalized. You can read this in Mathew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* when he discusses the aristocracy as "The Barbarians." They're actually paleolithic hunters, barbarians! The Beatles were English too, of course; they understood primitive power. The London designers, one of whom came up with the mini skirt, are far ahead of American designers. They understand all this tribal stuff.

It's interesting that the ballet costume evolved through longer lengths into a mini.

Yes, the short ballet costume was a direct result of archeological studies made in the late nineteenth century by choreographers and designers. Daighilev, one of the founders of The Ballet Russe, was very primitive in his approach to the ballet. Isadora Duncan was entirely tribal. Diaghilev was power: Jean Cocteau would come to him, on his knees, begging to do work for him.

What are your personal feelings about the miniskirt, Dr. McLuhan? You've never really liked it have you?

I'm not in favour of change at any time because it's such a nuisance. I resent the demands it makes on my energy. As far as following a whim of fashion, why that's ridiculous. If clothing were actually used to enhance the quality of life and beauty, well that would be different. But it's never been handled that way, except in primitive times. By the Balinese, for example, who said "We have no art. We do everything as naturally as possible." 🐾

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