

When a Dress and Suit Say More than a Thousand Words: Presidential Clothes as a New Form of Visual Culture and Cultural Analysis in American Press Discourse

Abstract:

This thesis has studied how the sartorial choices of the Bush and Obama couple have functioned in press discourse, with a particular focus on gender roles and politics, in order to demonstrate that the American presidential pair's wardrobe presents itself as a new and telling form of visual culture and visual language in political image making by the press. It has been found that presidential clothes, although usually marginalised in academic scholarship, in fact play an important role in journalistic cultural analysis and have far-reaching implications for the political climate and the gender dichotomy of the First Lady and the President in American society. Depending on whether the administration under analysis is Republican or Democratic, and displays a conservative or a populist style towards the press, sartorial journalistic analysis can bring about sentiments of either traditional conservatism or democratic populism, polarisation or unification, political disharmony or harmony, masculism or feminism, and restraint or liberation. As such, this tensionous sociopolitical power of presidential clothes in press discussions defies a new and revolutionary turn in visual press culture that can divide as well as unite American society.

Key words: visual culture, fashion, gender roles, American presidency, journalism

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Introduction

'If I want to knock a story off the front page, I just change my hairstyle.' -Hillary Clinton¹

During Donald Trump's first longly anticipated address to Congress on February 28 2017 it was not only his speech that sparked debate, but also the appearance of his political counterpart, First Lady Melania Trump. Following the event, the press exploded with opinions on the black fitted sequin skirt suit, from American designer Michael Kors, that Mrs. Trump had been wearing. *USA Today* started off: 'You don't usually see sequins in congress.'² Whereas *The New York Post* called Melania's outfit 'one of the edgier looks ... with glam-rock allusions,'³ *The Washington Post* dubbed her choice 'more cocktail party than a Capitol Hill gathering dedicated to budgets, health care and foreign policy.'⁴ *The New York Times* added to the criticism that Mrs. Trump's black appearance was in sharp contrast with the many female politicians who wore white at the address as a show of unity for women's rights.⁵ *The Observer* concluded that, although the media had mixed emotions towards her outfit, there was one thing all sides could agree upon: 'This suit [of 9,590 dollars] was downright pricey.'⁶

This press debate echoed the one over the pussy-bow blouse Mrs. Trump had been wearing at the second presidential debate back in October 2016, shortly after a controversial videotape had resurfaced in which Mr. Trump had talked about 'grabbing women by the pussy.'⁷ In addition to discussing the substance of the presidential debate, the press' attention had then heavily gone out to Mrs. Trump's pink Gucci pussybow blouse. Her pussybow was read as a visual reference to Mr. Trump's previous

¹ Karni, Annie. "Hillary's hair: she's in on the joke." *Politico*, 28 May 2015, <http://www.politico.com/story/2015/05/hillary-clinton-hair-118381>. Accessed 6 May 2017.

² Mallenbaum, Carly. "Sequins in Congress: Melania sparkles in Michael Kors for Trump's speech." *USA Today*, 28 Feb. 2017, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/life/entertainthis/2017/02/28/melania-trump-ivanka-trump-fashion-congress/98557562/>. Accessed 19 May 2017.

³ Laneri, Raquel. "Melania Trump glitters, literally, in Michael Kors at joint address to Congress." *The New York Post*, 28 Feb. 2017, <http://nypost.com/2017/02/28/melania-trump-glitters-literally-in-michael-kors-at-joint-address-to-congress/>. Accessed 9 May 2017.

⁴ Givhan, Robin. "The night the Trump family decided to dress the part." *The Washington Post*, 1 Mar. 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2017/03/01/the-night-the-trump-family-decided-to-dress-the-part/?utm_term=.d290065379f3. Accessed 9 May 2017.

⁵ Safronova, Valeriya. "Melania Trump Wears Black to the President's Speech (and Twitter Reacts)" *The New York Times*, 1 Mar. 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/01/fashion/melania-trump-michael-kors-black-suit-congress-joint-session.html>. Accessed 9 May 2017.

⁶ Silver, Dena. "Melania Trump Wore a \$10K Suit to the Joint Session of Congress" *The Observer*, 3 Mar. 2017, <http://observer.com/2017/03/melania-trump-10k-michael-kors-joint-session-of-congress/>. Accessed 9 May 2017.

⁷ "Transcript: Donald Trump's Taped Comments About Women" *The New York Times*, 8 Oct. 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/08/us/donald-trump-tape-transcript.html>. Accessed 10 May 2017.

controversial events.⁸ In these instances, the significance of political speech and substance was substantially complemented by excitement of the media over visual, and more specifically, sartorial appearances of the presidential pair.

Indeed, in press discussions of American Presidents and First Ladies clothes have come to play an increasingly significant role. The media are quick to judge and read every look of American politicians. *The New York Times*' chief fashion critic Vanessa Friedman noted that 2016 'was the year that politics took over our closets, and clothes went beyond products to become positions. ... Whether you like what you see or not, you can read it.'⁹ In similar fashion, *BBC* recently resonated in a sartorial critique of Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump that 'in this image-led era of news, it would be foolish to ignore carefully managed visual signals candidates that both sexes send. For a politician on the world stage today, getting the clothes right can be invaluable.'¹⁰ *The Washington Post*'s fashion critic Robin Givhan even won the 2006 Pulitzer price in the category of 'criticism' for her meaningful readings of politicians' clothes.¹¹

Seeking to provide an answer into the meaning of clothes as an object of critique in political press discussions, this thesis will examine: how does the growing press interest for the clothes of the American presidential pair present itself as a new and serious form of visual culture and cultural analysis with gender-specific and political implications? Gaining an insight into the meaning of sartorial press analysis of the American presidential pair, and to what extent this phenomenon is gender and politically determined, is of wider social significance as it tells us something about academic visual language, media culture and the status of gender and politics in American society.

In order to determine how the growing preoccupation of the press with the clothes of the presidential pair fits within journalistic visual culture and presents itself as a new form of visual language, it is important to analyse how scholars themselves look at the influence of visual culture on image making in American politics. For starters, it is generally agreed upon by academia that Western culture has shifted from an originally written culture to an explicit visual culture. J. W. T. Mitchell, one of the leading scholars in the domain of visual studies, already stated in 1994: 'We live in a culture of images, a society

⁸ Mazza, Ed. "Not A Joke: Melania Trump Wore A 'Pussy Bow' Blouse To The Debate" *The Huffington Post*, 10 Oct. 2016, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/melania-trump-pussy-bow_us_57fb127de4b068ecb5dfc1bd. Accessed 9 May 2017.

⁹ Friedman, Vanessa. "When Politics Became a Fashion Statement" *The New York Times*, 13 Dec. 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/13/fashion/the-year-in-style-politics-dressing.html>. Accessed 11 May 2017.

¹⁰ Banks, Libby. "When Politics Became a Fashion Statement" *BBC*, 26 Sep. 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20160926-trump-and-clinton-go-head-to-head-in-a-battle-of-the-image>. Accessed 11 May 2017.

¹¹ Bateman, Kristen. "Women who changed fashion: the editors and writers" *Harper's Bazaar*, 9 Dec. 2015, <http://www.harperbazaar.com/culture/features/g6480/editors-who-changed-fashion/>. Accessed 11 May 2017.

of the spectacle, a world of semblance's and simulacra.¹² Visual culture as a theoretical field of study focuses on aspects of culture that are dependent upon visual images.¹³ The image in visual culture, according to visual culture theorist Malcolm Barnard, is the great variety of visible two- and three dimensional things that are being produced and consumed by human beings - this includes but is not limited to television images, forms of visual art, websites, amateur photos, newspaper photos, facial expressions, fashion and tattoos.¹⁴

This increasingly important visual culture and image-system has also penetrated the world of politics, in which image has become of growing importance. Scholars attribute a great responsibility for the visual turn in politics to what Harvard University scholar Pippa Norris has called 'postmodern news.'¹⁵ Leading historian Stuart Ewen, for example, has connected the political image-management system to the industrial and rise of capitalism, in which style under capitalist values has become a tool to construct selfhood and society has fallen in love with a surface look.¹⁶ Image-minded politics is also often connected to the growth of television between the 1950s to the 1980s.¹⁷ Recent scholarship has gone on to stress social media's role in the visual acceleration of image making in politics. According to British media theorist John Corner and Dutch sociologist Dick Pels, the visual component of digital media has opened up new ways in which politicians can be watched by society in various online visual contexts.¹⁸ In line with these postmodern developments, scholars have also been detecting a journalistic preference for visual content in political image making.¹⁹ In 1979 sociologist David Altheide and media theorist Robert Snow developed the argument that political news coverage increasingly emphasises entertainment formulas of visual, dramatic action.²⁰

As visuals and appearance have become of growing importance in the media and in political image making, scholars have observed how presidents are increasingly relying visuals as part of their communication strategy. Examples are presidential performance

¹² Mitchell, W. J. T. *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*. The University of Chicago Press, 1994, pp. 5.

¹³ Mirzoeff, Nicholas. *An Introduction to Visual Culture*. Routledge, 1999.

¹⁴ Barnard, Malcolm. *Approaches to Understanding Visual Culture*. Palgrave, 2001.

¹⁵ Norris, Pippa. *Politics and the Press: The News Media and Their Influences*. Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1997, pp. 15.

¹⁶ Stuart, Ewen. *All consuming images: the politics of style in contemporary culture*. Basic Books, 1998.

¹⁷ Parry-Giles, Shawn. "Image-based politics, feminism and the consequences of their convergence," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, vol. 15, no. 4, 1998, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15295039809367063>. Accessed 19 May 2017.

¹⁸ Corner, John and Pels, Dick. *Media and the Restyling of Politics: consumerism, celebrity and cynicism*. Sage Publications, 2003.

¹⁹ Norris, Pippa. *A Virtuous Cycle: Political Communications in Postindustrial Societies*. Cambridge University Press, 2000.

²⁰ Altheide, David and Snow, Robert. *Media Logic*. Sage Publications, 1979.

fragments embodied in photo-opportunities²¹, and travel spectacles of presidents where verbal communication is marginalised and complex political issues are visually simplified.²² In addition, political scientist Martha Kumar has described how Bush's administration was the first administration to start investing more heavily in producing memorable pictures and photo content. Kumar, also served as advisor to George W. Bush, called this visual story building 'winning the picture.'²³ Politicians also rely on the importance of the visual in their crafting of strategic political personas, such as Michelle Obama who started to embrace a more traditional role after her approval ratings soar. Furthermore, Barack Obama's administration has been emblematic of the digital visual turn in politics through winning over young audiences with visuals and graphics on social media.²⁴

The effects of this visual culture in political image making on society and on how politics is experienced by citizens has debated by academia, whereby they disagree to which extent substance is now subverted by image. On the one hand, scholars, such as media theorist Jay Blumler and communications scholar Michael Gurevitch, have contended that the contemporary image-system in politics has led to a simplification of the political message and impoverished coverage about serious issues.²⁵ International communication professor Daya Thussu has called this 'infotainment', in which press and politics have been immersed in an entertainment format.²⁶ Already in 1967, well-respected linguist theorist Guy Debord criticised the fact that, because of television, politics started to evolve around entertainment at the expense of substance. He dubbed this phenomenon a 'society of the spectacle.'²⁷ In 1985, leading media theorist Neil Postman also acknowledged that, in the age of TV, all of reality in politics had become a show about optics and entertainment and had lost its deep thought and reflection. In similar fashion, communication scholar Kathleen Jamieson claimed in 1988 that dramatised spectacle had redefined presidential communications to the extent that 'the moving synoptic moment has

²¹ Erickson, Keith. "Presidential rhetoric's visual turn: Performance fragments and the politics of illusionism" *Communication Monographs*, vol. 67, no. 2, 2009, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03637750009376501>. Accessed 15 May 2017, pp. 247.

²² Erickson, Keith. "Presidential spectacles: Political illusionism and the rhetoric of travel" *Communication Monographs*, vol. 65, no. 2, 1998, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03637759809376442>. Accessed 15 May 2017, pp. 141.

²³ Kumar, Martha Joynt. *Managing the President's Message: The White House Communications Operation*. John Hopkins University Press, 2007, pp. 100.

²⁴ Hendricks, John and Denton, Robert. *Communicator-in-chief: How Barack Obama Used New Media Technology to Win the White House*. Lexington Books, 2010.

²⁵ Blumler, Jay and Gurevitch, Michael. *The Crisis of Public Communication*. Psychology Press, 1995.

²⁶ Thussu, Daya Kishan. *News as Entertainment: The Rise of Global Infotainment*. Sage Publications, 2007, pp. 1.

²⁷ Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*. Rebel Press, 1967.

replaced the eloquent speech.²⁸ Turning to the 21st century, political communication professors Shawn and Trevor Perry-Giles have gone on to argue through their analysis of image texts of Bill Clinton's presidency that contemporary politics is now defined by and trapped in hyperreality.²⁹

Additionally, academia have made the case that visual culture in politics has led to a degeneration of democracy. In the mid-1970s Michael Robinson first popularised the term 'videomalaise' to describe the how televised American political journalism has brought about political cynicism, social mistrust, and lack of political efficacy.³⁰ He claimed that television news overemphasised political conflict with its high 'negativism' and downplayed policy-making, generated political disaffection, frustration, cynicism, self-doubt and malaise. Political scientist Austin Ranney added to this view in 1983 that televised politics led to civic disengagement and a decline in voting.³¹ Furthermore, Ewen has alleged that in politics 'the primacy of style over substance has become the normative consciousness', which leads to alienation in society, lost subjectivity and conspicuous consumption.³² In contemporary times, Stanford University professor Nathaniel Persily has declared that social media and digital-campaign techniques have led to 'politics of never-ending spectacles that are unhealthy for democracy.'³³ Finally, Lester Olson, Cara Finnegan and Diane Hope have described in *Visual Rhetoric* how white-house-manipulated photo-opportunities have dramatically altered how Presidents are portrayed visually, lessening the administration's accountability and leading to suppressed the public's participation.³⁴

On the other hand, there are also scholars who interpret the visual trend in political image making in a more positive daylight, contradicting that this leads to simplified political communication. Jeremy Mayer has insisted that new media in particular - which require that presidents put greater effort into their image - allow presidents to present themselves

²⁸ Jamieson, Kathleen Hall, Birdsell, David. *The Presidential Debate: the Challenge of Creating an Informed Electorate*. Oxford University Press, 1988, p. 117

²⁹ Perry-Giles, Perry and Perry-Giles, Shawn. *Constructing Clinton: Hyperreality and Presidential Image-Making in Postmodern Politics*. Peter Lang Inc., 2002.

³⁰ Robinson, Michael. "Public Affairs Television and the Growth of Political Malaise: The Case of "the Selling of the President," *American Political Science Review*, vol. 70, no. 3, 1998. Accessed 13 May 2017.

³¹ Austin Ranney. *Channels of Power: The Impact of Television on American Politics*. American Enterprise Institute, 1983.

³² Stuart, Ewen. *All consuming images: the politics of style in contemporary culture*. Basic Books, 1998, pp. 2.

³³ Persily, Nathaniel. "Can democracy survive the internet?," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2017. Accessed 13 May 2017.

³⁴ Olson, Lester C., Finnegan, Cara A. and Hope, Diane. *Visual Rhetoric: A Reader in Communication and American Culture*. Sage Publications, 2008.

as more personal, tangible and malleable.³⁵ In similar fashion, media theorist Aid Kuntsman has set forth that the visual orientation of Instagram and the emergence of political ‘selfies’ allow politicians to paradoxically represent themselves as ‘ordinary’ and ‘extraordinary’ at the same time. These selfies do not evolve around self-promotion but rather round the maintenance of sociability with the citizen and establishing connectivity based on mutual life experiences.³⁶ Ultimately, television and other (new) media with a visual orientation bridge the distance between politicians and citizens.

The destabilising democratic effects of the visual culture in the image making of politics have also been contested. Norris³⁷ and New York University scholar Mitchell Stephens³⁸ have contradicted the video malaise hypothesis in their works by opting that visually oriented media and technologies have advanced democracy, as these media have intensified political communication and civic engagement. Furthermore, communication theorists Johanna Dunaway and Doris Graber have held that media with a visual orientation, such as television, have led to a greater availability of information and transparency of political practices.³⁹ In *‘What do pictures want? The life and love of images’* Mitchell reaffirms that the pictorial turn in society has allowed for a more liberal democracy in which images have a pluralist sense, a populist voice and in which there is an inclusion of voices in communicative capitalism.⁴⁰ Another positive democratic effect of visual political journalism is ‘The CNN effect’, which implies that the 24 hour-news cycle on News Channel CNN allows for transparency and pressures politicians to undertake immediate action.⁴¹ The phenomenon of how technological developments produce new vehicles for democratic practice has also been referred to as ‘the digital democracy.’⁴²

Although scholars have previously discussed the growing importance of visuals in political image making, the role of clothing as a part of this visual culture in politics has remained ignored. Whereas the arts, anthropology and sociology have been studying

³⁵ Mayer, Jeremy. “The Presidency and Image Management: Discipline in Pursuit of Illusion.” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, vol. 34, no. 3, 2004, doi 10.1111/j.1741-5705.2004.00215.x. Accessed 12 May 2017.

³⁶ Kuntsman, Adi. “Selfie Citizenship.” *Palgrave Macmillan*, 2017.

³⁷ Norris, Pippa. *A Virtuous Cycle: Political Communications in Postindustrial Societies*. Cambridge University Press, 2000.

³⁸ Stephens, Mitchell. *The Rise of the Image the Fall of the Word*, Oxford University Press, 1998.

³⁹ Graber, Doris and Dunaway, Johanna. “Mass Media and American Politics.” *Sage Publications*, 2015.

⁴⁰ Mitchell, W. J. T. “What do pictures want? The life and love of images.” *University of Chicago Press*, 2005.

⁴¹ Livingston, Steven. *Clarifying the CNN Effect: An Examination of Media Effects According to Type of Military Intervention*. John F. Kennedy School of Government’s Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy at Harvard University. 1997.

⁴² Hague, Barry, and Loader, Brian. “Digital Democracy: Discourse and Decision Making in the Information Age.” *Routledge*, 1999.

clothing for a long time, a degrading attitude towards fashion has been upheld in political and historical scholarship for decades. No study has analysed to what extent the growing interest of the press in the clothes of the presidential pair fits within the importance of visual culture in political image making. Seeking to address this gap, this thesis will analyse the symbolic role and reception of the presidential pair's clothes in the press, and its broader relevance for image politics and visual media culture, with a particular focus on gender-specific and political implications. It will be argued that, as press discussions are increasingly focused on the clothes of American Presidents and First Ladies - in which journalists look for greater political meaning and social symbolism - fashion becomes an alternate way for the press to present, discuss, and interpret politics and gender. This defies a new clothing-oriented media logic and a new visual turn within the visual culture of political image making.

In making this argument, the first chapter of this thesis will examine the academic context of visual press and gender historiographies in political image making, particularly with regards to the sartorial. The second and third chapter will examine in what way the 21st century press has been treating the clothes of the Bush and Obama couple as a form of cultural analysis, and what the political and gender-specific outcomes are of these cultural references. The comparison between the Bush and Obama administration (conservative versus liberal) is enlightening because it enables this paper to demonstrate how political discussions of clothes in journalistic visual culture can bring about a political party competition as well as a party unification. These presidencies were deliberately chosen because they have been exposed to the most online press coverage. The clothes of men as well as women will be discussed because this can tell us something about gender differences and the status of American First Ladies.

In order to clarify the important changes that have occurred between the press, gender and politics with regard to clothing, this thesis will rely on three theoretical concepts from media and gender studies. The first concept is Ervin Goffman's theory of media 'framing', or the frame through which news articles are presented and structured. According to framing theory the media focuses attention on certain events and then places these events within a field of meaning, or a so-called 'frame.' The term 'framing' was introduced in the 1970s and was defined as a system that allows the public to 'locate, perceive, identify and label' the varied information that it is presented with.⁴³ This concept

⁴³ Goffman, Erving. *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience.* Harper & Row, 1974, pp. 21.

of framing will be applied to examine how the press symbolically interprets and colours the clothing of the presidential Pair.

The second concept is 'gender roles', from the field of gender studies. Gender role theory holds that men and women are assumed and constructed by society to perform different gender roles: 'Gender dictates how to dress, act and behave as a man or a woman, and is maintained through the presence of underlying ideologies (patriarchy, capitalism and race/ethnicity) – ideologies that position masculinity and femininity as binaries.'⁴⁴ Erika Falk has denoted that traditional gender roles 'link men to the public sphere and women to caring roles.'⁴⁵ Feminist media critics have alleged that journalists consciously or unconsciously reinforce these traditional gender roles in news stories.⁴⁶ According to Cynthia Carter et al., the media 'provide sexist judgments about women such that their subordinate status within patriarchal society is symbolically reinforced.'⁴⁷ It can thus be hypothesised in this thesis that First Ladies and Presidents may be cast into stereotypical gender roles by journalists through a prominent focus on clothing when it regards women and less so when it regards men. Whereas the President may be deemed to carry out his message substantially, the First Lady may be deemed to do so more visually. Through relating fashion to gender, this paper will test if this hypothesis holds true.

The third concept is David Altheide's and Robert Snow's theory of media logic. Media logic is the institutionalised structure in which the media sees and interprets affairs: 'media logic functions as a form through which events and ideas are interpreted and acted upon'.⁴⁸ The media logic hypothesis holds that journalists are guided by news values and their own format requirements in how they present political news, resulting in certain content characteristics being highlighted in (political) news. According to Esser and Stromback, characteristics of media logic are for example the accentuation of persons, the simplification of complex issues, the focus on confrontation instead of compromise, and a perspective on politics that is characterised by winners and losers.⁴⁹ This thesis will

⁴⁴ Mendes, Kaitlin. "Feminism in the news: representations of the women's movement since the 1960s." Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

⁴⁵ Falomir, Juan, Martinez, Carmen, Paterna, Consuela, and Roux, Patricia. "Predicting gender awareness: the relevance of neo-sexism." *Journal of Gender Studies*, vol 19, no. 1, 2010, pp. 2.

⁴⁶ "The Power of a Woman," *Ladies' Home Journal*, September 1969, 93.

⁴⁷ Cynthia Carter, Gill Branston, and Stuart Allan, eds., "News, Gender, and Power." Routledge, 1998.

⁴⁸ Altheide, David and Snow, Robert. *Media Logic*. Sage Publications, 1979, pp. 204.

⁴⁹ Stromback, Jesper and Esser, Frank. "Mediatization of politics: towards a theoretical framework." *Mediatization of politics: Understanding the Transformation of Western Democracies*, edited by Frank Esser and Jasper Stromback, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

highlight a new characteristic of media logic: a type of coverage that is centred on formulas of what Presidents and First Ladies are wearing.

To examine how the clothes of the American Presidential pair are treated in the press, this thesis will rely on online textual articles of American newspapers as its primary sources. These articles will offer an interesting perspective on whether there is also a visual culture going on within *textual* media as opposed to the previously elaborately discussed visual media. Online articles of five large newspapers will be taken into consideration, namely: *The New York Times* (left-wing), *The Washington Post* (left-wing), *The New York Post* (right-wing), and *The Washington Times* (right-wing). These specific newspapers were chosen based on their wide circulation and attention for presidential clothing. While *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and *The Washington Times* are more elitist, the *New York Post* is more mass-oriented. Furthermore, the liberal *New York Times* is especially culturally-minded whereas the conservative *Washington Times* is less so, but the equally conservative *New York Post* is all the more versed in popular culture. Moreover, the leftist *New York Times* and *Washington Post* are more focused on cultural analysis than their right-winged counterparts. These newspapers also have their own specialty fashion critics, Vanessa Friedman and Robin Givhan. Because of these differing cultural and political perspectives these large newspapers together make up a politically diverse and representative pool for this study.

Articles written between 2001 and 2016 will be analysed, since this was the period during which the Bush and subsequently the Obama family occupied the oval office. One limitation to using these sources is that the amount of available online news coverage can be expected to be lower near the beginning of the century, since the internet was not as developed as it is now. This may correlate with less available information on what the Presidential pair was wearing at the time. Another limitation is that the online news coverage cannot provide an insight into what these media were meanwhile writing in print; the print coverage therefore serves as a 'blank spot' in the argument of this thesis.

With regard to the articles chosen, this thesis will analyse press responses to clothes of the Presidential pair that have sparked particularly much debate in the media. Sub-questions that will be answered are: 1) To what extent is the press coverage presented in a format of what the presidential pair is wearing? 2) What political significance does the press attribute to the clothes of the presidential pair? 3) Does the press recognise certain styles and performed identities in the clothing choices of each politician? 4) How do the sartorial analyses of presidents and first ladies differ along gender lines? 5) Does the

press recognise a conscious communication strategy behind the clothes of the presidential pair?

Ultimately, this thesis will demonstrate that the focus of the press on American presidential fashion is a new and important form of text-based visual culture in political image making and cultural analysis that has far-exceeding gender and political implications. The media labels clothes of politicians as all but 'frivolous': they present the clothes of the presidential pair as a new form of political communication that has polarising and unifying results, and conservative as well as emancipating gender-specific effects. Ultimately, clothing in journalistic image making has democratising potential that can mollify strained relationships between the presidency and the media. Furthermore, even though sartorial analysis can be considered a new serious form of visual culture, it also incorporates a somewhat problematic tension with gender. Now, this thesis will bridge this fascinating sartorial phenomenon from the practical field of politics and the press to the discipline of academic historical scholarship.

Chapter 1: Clothing and gender in presidential press portrayals

1.1 Introduction

In order to determine whether the growing press interest for the clothes of the American presidential pair points to an emancipation of clothing as a serious cultural phenomenon with political and gender-specific implications, more insight is needed into how gender roles and clothing have been shaping presidential image making by the press over time. This chapter will therefore examine how the historiographies of gender and image culture have approached the role of gender in presidential image making since the 20th century, particularly with regards to the sartorial. Gender is an upcoming field that incorporates a certain relationship with clothes, which has previously gone unnoticed in scholarship. Yet, this relationship between gender and clothes becomes evident in the growing press attention for clothes. This chapter will thus compare two historiographies with each other, namely (visual) press historiography and gender historiography, and will study the role that presidential fashion has played in this.

In addition, this chapter will look at how image culture and gender studies have dealt with both the Bush as well as the Obama presidency; it will be interesting to analyse the tension between these two presidencies, as they appear to be quite antithetical in their display of political values and gender roles. Ultimately, the comparison between Bush and Obama (conservative versus liberal) is enlightening because it enables demonstrating in chapter two and three how sartorial press analysis of antithetical presidencies has opposite political and gender outcomes, and how clothes bring about a political party competition as well as a party unification. In all, this chapter will provide a context in which the contemporary findings from this thesis can be placed.

1.2 The role of clothing in visual press historiography

The amount of attention going out to the presidential pair's sartorial choices in the press is remarkable to say the least, and begs for more context to understand *why* this is happening. Yet, little has been written on the role of political clothing in relation to the press' visual culture. Although much has been written about visual culture in the press, this usually amounts to visual media such as television and photos -the role of clothing as part of this visual culture within political press historiography has been seriously neglected.

Political scientists usually only briefly touch upon the role that clothing plays in political image making by the media. Alan Schroeder, a visual journalism professor at Northeastern University, has noted in his book *Presidential Debates: Forty Years of High-*

Risk TV how the clothes of presidents play a substantial role in televised debates.⁵⁰ In similar fashion, Maurine Beasley, professor of journalism at the University of Maryland, has demonstrated in *First Ladies and the Press: The Unfinished Partnership of the Media Age* that the emergence of television allowed the clothes of the presidential pair to become a more vivid cultural phenomenon. She discusses how Jackie Kennedy's move into the White House coincided with the rise of colour television specials, and that the new medium suited the stylish and elegant first lady: 'Television projected style, if not substance, and the Kennedys excelled in style.'⁵¹ Additionally, psychoanalyst Alma Halbert Bond has argued that Kennedy used clothing to represent greater cultural values towards the world and the media: 'With the election of John F. Kennedy in 1961, Jackie Kennedy adopted a "look" to 'show the world that despite its reputation of being a rustic, uncultured country, the United States was a nation of elegance, poise, an culture.'⁵²

In her article *Men don't make passes at Girls who wear glasses* Diane Rubenstein, an American Studies lecturer at Cornell University, has related First Lady Hillary Clinton's lack of success in the nineties to the way she dressed and how this was received in the media. She opted that 'readings of Hillary Clinton focus on the change in highly overdetermined sartorial and corporeal markers. They capitalise on certain visual cliches. ... Bill's comeback is accompanied by the adoption of Bill's last name hair dye, and contact lenses.'⁵³ Similarly, English professor Oles-Acevedo has agreed that Mrs. Clinton's style proved problematic in the media's assessment of her as an authentic representation of American womanhood, particularly in her ongoing and persistent desire to wear pantsuits.⁵⁴

In spite of these brief acknowledgements of the role that clothing plays in presidential image making by the press, isolated studies dedicated to politician's clothes in visual press discourse are rare. Only recently scholars have started to take note of clothing's relevance in the visual political domain, which means it is a new and upcoming field that is still in its infantile beginnings. Andreas Behnke, associate professor in political theory at the University of Reading, is one of the very few academia who has studied clothing in relation

⁵⁰ Schroeder, Alan. *Presidential debates: forty years of high-risk TV.* Columbia University Press, 2000.

⁵¹ Beasley, Maurine Hoffman. *First Ladies and the Press: The Unfinished Partnership of the Media Age.* Northwestern University Press, 2005, pp. 76.

⁵² Sibley, Katherine. *A Companion to First Ladies.* Wiley, 2005, pp. 133.

⁵³ Rubenstein, Diane. *This is not a president: sense, nonsense and the American political imagery.* New York University Press, 2008, pp. 136.

⁵⁴ Oles-Acevedo, Denise. "Fixing the Hillary Factor: Examining the Trajectory of Hillary Clinton's Image Repair from Political Bumbler to Political Powerhouse." *American Communication Journal*, vol 14, no. 1, 2012, pp.36.

to political image making by the press in his 2017 work *The International Politics of Fashion*.⁵⁵ He has demonstrated how female politicians, such as First Lady Margaret Thatcher and Michelle Obama, rely on clothing to perform certain strategic personas to the press. Additionally, media sociology professor Jo Coghlan has studied in her 2017 article how First Ladies took part in gendered performances to the press through their sartorial choices. She argues that their clothes stored different sociological meanings that were much deeper than first apparent. 'In generationally positioning themselves within the demands and idealisation of being the universal and authentic site of American womanhood, texts of body, race, national identity, feminism and class variously complicate the preferred and discursive narrative of the gendered performance of First Ladies.'⁵⁶

However, more literature on the role of the presidential pair's clothing in visual press historiography is considerably scarce. The question arises why this phenomenon serves as a blank spot within academic scholarship. Behnke offers the following explanation: 'the lack of a conceptual and theoretical framework to understand the role that fashion plays in politics in general, and in the visualisation of sovereignty in particular, can be attributed to the dominant modern rationalist understanding of politics and its concomitant rejection of aesthetics and representation as irrelevant to the constitution of political order.'⁵⁷ Indeed, academic scholarship considers fashion a frivolous matter. Valerie Steele, history professor at UCLA, already observed in 1991 in her essay *The F-word*: 'To dress fashionably is to be labeled frivolous, to seem to ... downplay the life of the mind. Most colleagues view sartorial interest and especially sartorial 'play' ... with a mixture of amusement, condescension, and fear. [Through] bad dressing ... academics can project the illusion of other-worldliness.'⁵⁸

Another possible explanation for why clothing is neglected in literature on presidential image making may be the fact that academic attention for First Ladies - to which sartorial analysis most often pertains - is a fairly recent phenomenon, which stems from the mid-1980s with the work of researchers such as Lewis Gould, Caroli, Myra G. Gutin and Robert P. Watson.⁵⁹ Another potential explanation for the absence of clothing in political

⁵⁵ Behnke, Andreas. "The international politics of fashion: being fab in a dangerous world. *Popular culture and world politics*." Routledge, 2016.

⁵⁶ Coghlan, Jo. "Gendered Performances of the Costumed Bodies of Hillary Clinton and Michelle Obama." (manuscript draft) *American Journal of Sociology*, 2017, pp.1.

⁵⁷ Behnke, Andreas. "The international politics of fashion: being fab in a dangerous world. *Popular culture and world politics*." Routledge, 2016, pp. 3.

⁵⁸ Steele, Valerie. "The F-word." *Lingua Franca*. Available online at www.wiu.edu/users/mfbhl/180/steele/htm. Accessed 18 May 2017.

⁵⁹ Burns, Lisa M. "First Ladies as Political Women: Press framing of Presidential wives." *Dissertation University of Maryland*, 2004. Available at <http://drum.lib.umd.edu/bitstream/handle/1903/1968/umi-umd-1918.pdf;sequence=1>. Accessed May 15.

scholarship could be the fact that scholars may be more often male than female and thereby less interested in addressing the sartorial.

1.3 Gender roles of American presidential pairs in press historiography

In contrast to clothing, an image making component in press discussions of the Presidential pair that *has* been getting an overt amount of attention is the notion of gender. It is generally agreed upon that our society is upheld by gender ideologies, in which men and women operate in different spheres.⁶⁰ This gender dichotomy and secularisation between the public and private has also been reflected in the domain of American politics and Presidencies. Leading political scientist Maryanne Borrelli notes in *The politics of the President's wife* that 'the President is expected to epitomise a masculine ideal of strength, while the First Lady similarly presents a feminine ideal of deference. ... Gender ideology [of the first couple] calls for a strong, commanding and authoritative, independent and unequivocal president; and a nurturing, other directed and thoughtful, reflective moral guardian as first lady. He embodies the best of the public sphere she emotes the best of the private sphere.'⁶¹ Gender scholars have concluded that the American presidency is arguably framed as the most hyper masculine post in the United States government.

According to Borrelli, traits linked to presidential masculinity include self-reliance, autonomy, competitiveness and ambition, athleticism, intellectual abilities, personal strength, and forceful leadership. In contrast, the First Lady is regarded the most visible symbol of American womanhood in society, and an emblem of hyper femininity. Borrelli elucidates how modern first ladies' symbolic domestic representation becomes evident through how they coordinate white house events, from morning meetings and teas to state dinners and concert series. University of Southern Mississippi professor Keith Erickson has gone on to contend that even during public travels abroad the First Lady takes on a gendered diplomacy role that serves to bolster a President's image, rather than calling attention to world affairs.⁶²

Correlatively, it has long been recognised by press historiography that there is a significant and long lasting influence of the media in either challenging or perpetrating

⁶⁰ Sharda, Adhikari. "Media and Gender Stereotyping: The need for Media Literacy." *International Research Journal of Social Sciences*, vol 3, no. 8, 2014.

⁶¹ Borrelli, Maryanne. "The Politics of the President's Wife." Texas A&M University Press, 2011, pp. 8-9.

⁶² Erickson, Keith. "Presidential spectacles: Political illusionism and the rhetoric of travel" *Communication Monographs*, vol. 65, no. 2, 1998, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03637759809376442>. Accessed 15 May 2017, pp. 141.

these existing constructions of gender of Presidents and First Ladies.⁶³ According to communication scholar Myra G. Gutin, the press plays a vital part in transmitting both the image and substance of a President and a First Lady.⁶⁴ Professor at the Missouri school of Journalism Betty Houchin Winfield has plead that ‘the first lady has become a collective image, undefined when the country was founded, but framed by the media.’⁶⁵ Within the press, the presidential couple serves as a barometer of the status of men and women in society, and the shifting roles of ‘manhood’ and ‘womanhood’, as set forth by award-winning political scientist Robert P. Watson.⁶⁶ Their roles and treatment by journalists reflect the status of men and women and social expectations throughout history. Theoretical expert on the American presidential couple Gil Troy maintains: ‘With the rise of the national media, the President has become the nation’s celebrity-in-chief. . . . As the most famous man in America, his wife, his daughter, even his cat and dog, become role models for the nation.’⁶⁷

In addition, Lewis L. Gould, a theoretical expert on the First Lady, has asserted that First Ladies in particular offer a significant perspective on how their American citizens view marriage, taking care of children, women in society, and gender relations in American society. ‘Americans have sensed that the wife of the President of the United States says something meaningful about the way the nation has chosen to organise its private and public affairs.’⁶⁸ Each First Lady has served as a metaphor for her generation of women.⁶⁹ Equally, the President serves as a role model for manhood: ‘The presidency as it is constructed in media culture defines the masculine ideal, and thus serves to model for boys and men the most socially acceptable and validated qualities of manhood at any given moment. This masculine ideal is not static, but instead is every-changing and subject to ongoing historical evolutions.’⁷⁰

⁶³ Sharda, Adhikari. “Media and Gender Stereotyping: The need for Media Literacy.” *International Research Journal of Social Sciences*, vol 3, no. 8, 2014.

⁶⁴ Gutin, Myra G. *The President’s Partner: The First Lady in the Twentieth Century*. Greenwood Press, 1989.

⁶⁵ Winfield, Betty Houchin. “*The First Lady, Political Power, and the Media: Who Elected Her Anyway?*,” in *Women, Media, and Politics*, ed. Pippa Norris. Oxford University Press, 1997, pp. 166.

⁶⁶ Watson, Robert P., and Anthony J. Eksterowicz, eds. *The Presidential Companion: Readings on the First Ladies*. University of South Carolina Press, 2003, pp. 54.

⁶⁷ Troy, Gil. *Mr. and Mrs. President: From the Trumans to the Clintons*. University Press of Kansas, 2000, pp. 13.

⁶⁸ Gould, Lewis L. *American First Ladies their Lives and Their Legacy*. Routledge, 2001, pp. xiii.

⁶⁹ Burns, 2004, pp. 13.

⁷⁰Katz, Jackson. “*Leading Men: Presidential Campaigns and the politics of manhood.*” Interlink Publishing, 2012, pp 66.

1.4 Gender roles in the Bush presidency

The previously discussed press model, in which the press magnifies and reinforces traditional gender roles through their frame of the American presidency, has been reflected in the traditional gender portrayal of the Bush administration, where the themes of hyper masculinity and hyper femininity have dominated the tenure. In line with being a conservative administration, the Bush presidency has projected a conservative gender ideology that has promoted these traditional gender roles.⁷¹ According to political scientists Lori Jo Marso and Michael L. Ferguson the Bush presidency 'requires an understanding of the gender conservatism at its core.'

For starters, First Lady Laura Bush has been known to have projected a hyper feminine traditional domestic gender role to the press that represented womanhood and fitted well within her conservative ideology. Beasley has interpreted her role towards the public and the media as an ultimate nurturing, motherly figure.⁷² Correspondingly, Marso and Ferguson aptly describe Mrs. Bush as 'a woman who quit the pink-collar job of librarian to raise her family and support her husband's political aspirations.'⁷³ Borrelli has also contented that, even within her social work in the public sphere, 'Bush presented herself as a moral guardian, analysing family relations and calling for change - but not for government intervention. Even though Bush spoke in the public sphere, she was careful to voice her judgments from the private sphere.'⁷⁴ As such, the press placed Mrs. Bush in a traditional gender role by confining her to the private domain, and subjecting her to commentary on her physical appearance - more so than her male counterpart Mr. Bush.

In contrast, according to Kevin Coe et. al, President George Bush was particularly striking in enacting a masculine ideology through the press. Following the attacks on September 11, Bush displayed a highly masculine postwar ideology to the media through emphasising qualities such as strength and dominance, which led to a wide circulation of masculine press discourse.⁷⁵ In *This is Not a President: Sense, Nonsense, and the American Political Imaginary* Rubenstein has added to this view that Bush' 'repudiation of the feminine is twinned with an overcompensation of masculine behaviour than can look

⁷¹ Marso, Lori Jo and Ferguson, Michael L. "W Stands for Women: How the George W. Bush Presidency Shaped a New Politics of Gender." Duke University Press, 2007.

⁷² Beasley, 2005.

⁷³ Marso and Ferguson, 2007, pp. 5.

⁷⁴ Borrelli, 2011, pp. 6.

⁷⁵ Coe, Kevin, Domke, David, Bagley Meredith, Cunningham, Sherl and Van Leuven, Nancy. "Masculinity as Political Strategy: George W. Bush, the "War on Terrorism," and an Echoing Press." *Journal of Women, Politics and Polity*, vol 29, no. 1, 2007. Doi: 10.1300/J501v29n01_03. Accessed May 31, pp. 1.

only to Jerry Lewis's Nutty Professor for an equally apt hysterical enactment. Bush as wimp is transformed to macho-Bush only by an excess of masochistic self-victimisation.⁷⁶ Similarly, political scientists Danny Hayes and Jennifer F. Lawless have illustrated that president Bush had the ambition to be a traditional war President and paragon of American manhood: 'Bush explicitly adopted the traditional male role of providing order and security for the homeland... [He] has gone to great lengths to present himself as an all-round American guy... in which he attempts to portray himself as macho leader prepared to use violence to protect his people.'⁷⁷ Jackson Katz, a scholar specialised in the politics of manhood, has equally alleged that there is a masculine ideal circulating in press culture with regard to American politicians, which was also applied to George Bush.⁷⁸ Therefore, George Bush was confined to the public domain and framed in a masculine manner by the press.

1.5 Gender roles in the Obama presidency

Even though the press has been inclined to reinforce the traditional gender dichotomy of the Presidential pair, they have, in response to modern social developments, also begun to present a more fluid version of the couple's roles. For starters, postindustrial, feminist values, that became especially apparent in the 20th century, have been blurring the traditional gender dichotomy of the presidential pair to some extent. American presidential historian and popular commentator on politics Gil Troy has referred to this trend as 'the rise of the First Couple.'⁷⁹

On the one hand, First Ladies have slowly entered the public sphere and have been getting more involved in politics.⁸⁰ Borrelli has affirmed that 'during the modern presidency, changes ... fundamentally altered the exercise of power. Deeply engaged in communications and in building relationships, First Ladies were among those mediating these changes for the president and the presidency. The presidents' wives have literally 're-presented ... the presidency.'⁸¹ Troy has provided a similar perspective in setting forth that First Ladies have become increasingly activist.⁸² Betty Caroli, a leading academic

⁷⁶ Rubenstein, 2008, pp. 78.

⁷⁷ Marso and Ferguson, 2007, pp. 72.

⁷⁸ Katz, Jackson. "Leading Men: Presidential Campaigns and the politics of manhood." Interlink Publishing, 2012.

⁷⁹ Troy, Gil. *Mr. and Mrs. President: From the Trumans to the Clintons*. University Press of Kansas, 2000, pp. 11.

⁸⁰ Burns, 2004.

⁸¹ Borrelli, 2011, pp. 3.

⁸² Troy, 2000, pp. 243.

voice on American First Ladies' role in politics, concludes that 'individual First Ladies have reflected the status of American women of their time while helping shape the expectations of what women can properly do. They extend our understanding of how women participated in government in ways other than simply voting and holding office.'⁸³ On the other hand, the gender role of the American President has been changing slightly in similar fashion as presidents have started to project themselves in a less masculine way. Communication professor Brent Malin has made the case that in the American presidency a crisis of masculinity' took root, in which men questioned traditional male ideas and sought new identities. In the new climate of masculinity, a new phase of a more sensitive manhood has come into existence, which contrasts with previous stereotypically hyper masculine administrations.⁸⁴

The administration of Barack and Michelle Obama in particular has responded to this modernising evolution of presidential gender roles in politics and journalistic image culture. Their tenure, in contrast to the conservative Bush administration, has been noteworthy for having challenged themes of hyper masculinity and hyper femininity. For starters, the roles of the Obama administration were challenging by themselves as they were the first black presidential pair in history. This already posed a preliminary challenge for President Barack Obama to not come across as popularised stereotypes of "angry black man." Barker has set forth that Obama consequently developed a powerful counter narrative by presenting himself as a family man and expressing a "positive black masculinity." 'The president has expressed that his family is priority, and despite his role as the leader of the country, he makes time for a date night with his wife and quality time with his children.'⁸⁵ Comparably, Cooper has highlighted Mr. Obama's feminine side and claimed that Obama may one day be viewed as our first woman president. According to Cooper, Obama adopted a 'unisex' political style, suitable to either gender, in which he avoided coming across as too masculine and too feminine at the same time.⁸⁶ 'I believe Obama's unisex performance on the world's biggest stage suggests that we are all more free to perform our race and our gender as we see fit than we had previously believed.'⁸⁷ It is therefore not surprising that

⁸³ Gill, R. and Scarf, C. *"First Ladies: From Martha Washington to Michelle Obama."* Oxford University Press, 2010, pp. xxi.

⁸⁴ Malin, Brent. *"American Masculinity under Clinton: Popular Media and the Nineties."* Peter Lang Inc., 2005.

⁸⁵ Barker, 2016, pp. 178.

⁸⁶ Cooper, 2009, pp. 633.

⁸⁷ Idem.

English theorists Shannon R. Wooden and Ken Gillam have referred to Barack Obama, in their book on masculinity in a postmodern age, as ‘the least sexist President in history.’⁸⁸

First Lady Michelle Obama, on her part, has also challenged the traditional First Lady role of womanhood by positioning herself as a postfeminist symbol of optimism and change.⁸⁹ For starters, her black skin immediately challenged the idealisation of the First Lady as a symbol of traditional white middle to upper class femininity in the United States.⁹⁰ Furthermore, Mrs. Obama’s background as a lawyer already reflected her non-traditional and emancipated feminine identity. However, as this identity initially formed a problem for her public image, Obama rebranded herself into a more domestic role. She repeatedly underscored her role as a mother and family person during her tenure, and invested her time in domestic projects related to food and nutrition, childhood health, fashion, gardens and menus.⁹¹ In doing so, scholar Caroline Brown has spoken of ‘a radical image makeover’ and ‘the president’s wife’s “mommification.”’⁹² Yet, Mrs. Obama always stayed faithful to her independent postfeminist identity. She became publicly known as ‘mom-in-chief’ and made it no secret that she was a leader in her family.⁹³ Thus, in the end, Mrs. Obama’s First Lady role has still been regarded ‘outspoken’ and ‘not domestic.’⁹⁴ Responding to Michelle Obama’s unconventional image, the press has played a significant role in bringing First Lady Obama from her private sphere into the public sphere, and has made her a figure worthy of press attention.

Yet, in spite of a greater visibility in the public sphere, the contestation of the gender stereotype by Michelle Obama and other First Ladies has meanwhile also resulted in press resistance. This ultimately points at an ongoing gender struggle for the First Lady. Borrelli has discovered: ‘When First Ladies challenge the gender dichotomy, their coverage becomes far more negative and their approval ratings drop. Formally and informally, it is difficult for a president’s wife to sustain herself as a credible, influential decision maker.’⁹⁵ Media theorists Erica Scharrer and Kim Bissell have acknowledged that the more

⁸⁸ Wooden, Shannon R. and Gillam, Ken. *“Pixar’s Boy Stories: Masculinity in a Postmodern Age.”* Rowman and Littlefield, 2007, pp. viii.

⁸⁹ Coghlan, 2017.

⁹⁰ Sibley, Katherine. *“A Companion to First Ladies.”* Wiley, 2005

⁹¹ Coghlan, 2017.

⁹² Brown, Caroline. “Marketing Michelle: Mommy Politics and Post-Feminism in the Age of Obama”, *Comparative American Studies an International Journal*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2013, doi 10.1179/1477570012Z.00000000018. Accessed 29 May 2017, pp. 239.

⁹³ Idem.

⁹⁴ idem, pp.19.

⁹⁵ Borrelli, 2011, pp. 16.

politically active the First Lady was, the more negative the tone of the coverage. 'When the First Lady acted in the more traditional roles of hostess and escort, media coverage was notably more positive.'⁹⁶ Furthermore, scholars have found that First Ladies who obtained more political influence were often criticised by the press.⁹⁷

Overall, the press appears to prefer to frame the First Lady in a non-political role, focussing more on her social contributions than on her political activities.⁹⁸ Troy suggests that each First Lady has to live up to media expectations of being assertive but not aggressive, prominent but not overbearing, and creative, but not controversial. 'The First Ladyship is an aristocratic throwback to an oddly patrician position in our robust, normally meritocratic democracy. The Victorian ideal still survives.'⁹⁹ Burns concludes that 'While First Ladies' status as public women and gendered celebrities results in both access to and influence within U.S. political culture, they remain on the fringes, with their power largely limited to domestic matters and women's issues.'¹⁰⁰

As such, First Ladies find themselves paradoxically trapped between expectations of the press to remain within the constraints of a traditional gender role, while also having to respond to a modernising society. Burns has rightfully noted: 'Because they are positioned as "ideals" of American womanhood, journalists often expect first ladies to embody traditional gender roles while also reflecting the changing times.'¹⁰¹ American presidency and gender expert James G. Benze adds: 'The multiple roles of women in American society (homemaker and working woman) are reflected in the demands of First Ladies, often resulting in double binds perpetuated by the press that result in "no-win" situations for First Ladies.'¹⁰² Michelle Obama proves that this gender paradox remains to lie at the basis of the First Lady administration. Indeed, Coghlan observes: 'the very qualities that make Michelle Obama an icon of twenty-first-century womanhood — her strong opinions, her frankness in expressing them, and confidence born of bootstrap triumphs — also make her a rich target for those who still believe that outspoken woman and First Lady should

⁹⁶ Erica Scharrer and Kim Bissell, "Overcoming Traditional Boundaries: The Role of Political Activity in Media Coverage of First Ladies," *Women and Politics* 21 (2000): 55-83.

⁹⁷ Beasley, 2005.

⁹⁸ Liz Watts, "Magazine Coverage of First Ladies From Hoover to Clinton: From Election Through the First One Hundred Days of Office," *American Journalism* 14 (1997): 495-519.

⁹⁹ *Idem*, pp. 330.

¹⁰⁰ Burns, 2004, pp. xi.

¹⁰¹ Burns, 2004, pp. 9.

¹⁰² James G. Benze, Jr. "Nancy Reagan: China Doll or Dragon Lady," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 20 (1990): 778.

never be synonymous.¹⁰³ Troy has captured this paradox vividly in saying that the First Lady is ‘a throwback of a position with one high-heeled shoe firmly planted in the Victorian gentility of the nineteenth century and one sensible pump planted in the anything-goes hurly-burly of late twentieth century American life.’¹⁰⁴

Equally, the contestation of gender stereotypes by Barack Obama and other Presidents has meanwhile also resulted in press resistance. When American Presidents have presented themselves as too feminine they have been critiqued by the media for their lack of masculinity.¹⁰⁵ Duerst-Lahti sets forth: ‘Male [American political] candidates often have their credibility challenged through attacks on their masculinity, which are cast in terms of their being too feminine. This dynamic is one area in which press coverage of presidential candidates does seem to explicitly recognise masculinity, or lack thereof. Coverage focuses on whether a candidate is manly enough... in (various) instances, the feminine is deployed to denigrate the man and his Masculinity.’¹⁰⁶

Moreover, Katz has detected that conservative media are especially likely to attack democratic men for being too feminine and soft, as the republic party relies more on a masculine ideology and traditional division of gender roles. ‘The deliberate feminisation of Democratic men is almost always on display in the conservative media.’¹⁰⁷ But these journalistic attacks on a less masculine presidential display are also present in liberal media: when Mr. Obama, not fitting the white masculine stereotype, came into the public domain in 2009 it was also questioned by liberal newspapers, such as *The New York Times*, whether he would be “man enough.”¹⁰⁸ Hence, in spite of some fluidity and modernisation, a strong masculine ideology destined for the public sphere thus remains to dominate the presidential image in the press. As Katz has put it: ‘Presidents ... need to constantly prove their manhood. In a culture awash in media spectacle, they must perform their manhood on the public stage.’¹⁰⁹

Conclusion

¹⁰³ Coghlan, 2017.

¹⁰⁴ Troy, 2000.

¹⁰⁵ Katz, 2012.

¹⁰⁶ Duerst-Lahti, 2006, pp. 84.

¹⁰⁷ Katz, 2012.

¹⁰⁸ Idem.

¹⁰⁹ Katz, 2013.

This chapter has examined how gender roles in the historiography of gender and image culture have been shaping presidential image making by the press over time, integrating the historiographies of gender and image culture with each other. Academic discourse has observed that the press has been framing the presidential pair according to an underlying ideological assumption of stereotypical gender roles. A dichotomy of a masculine President - who leads, engages in war and plays sports - and a feminine First Lady - who occupies herself with household tasks, family affairs, and appearance - is idealised and displayed, whereby the couple operates in two secular spheres, namely the public and the private.

Although recently this dichotomy has blurred to some extent due to modernising influences, there still appears to be much resistance to this modernisation of gender roles in the press. The press prefers to place the presidential couple in hyper feminine and hyper masculine frames, and female political activism is discouraged. Quite paradoxically, it is the press that has brought the First Lady into the public domain, yet regularly keeps reducing her role to the domestic domain. Furthermore, the role of the sartorial in how these historiographies approach gender has been significantly marginalised. Presidential clothing as part of the visual culture of the press is a recent and upcoming field that has only been studied in isolation by less than a handful of scholars, and its relationship with gender roles has largely remained unnoticed. However, the academic interest in politician's sartorial choices appears to be growing, as gender *does* incorporate a telling relationship with clothes.

Two lucid examples of a traditional gender display versus a modern gender display are the Bush and the Obama administration, which are both polarised because of an antithetical gender tension. Whereas the Bush administration was known to display a hyper masculine ideal of womanhood and manhood to the press, the Obama administration sought to use their black race and unconventional appearance as a means to abandon traditional gender discrepancies. Yet notably, Barack Obama was attacked by the press for his feminine style and Michelle Obama found herself particularly polarised between responding to feminist expectations of a contemporary modernising society and remaining within the press' constraints of a traditional Victorian gender role. This goes on to show that traditional gender assumptions by the press remain to dominate journalistic visual culture.

Chapter 2: Sartorial meanings in the journalistic image making of Mr. and Mrs. Bush

Introduction

Although the clothes of the American presidential pair are becoming increasingly important in journalistic image making, the press did not make the sartorial choices of the Bush pair a very telling part of their image in the first decade of the 21st century. Official appearances were only marginally exposed to sartorial coverage and especially Mr. Bush's outfits were ignored in visual press discussion. This may be related to the style that the Bush pair has displayed, as will be explained in this chapter. Furthermore, although both Mr. and Mrs. Bush have been subjected to some sartorial discussion, this analysis has often not been an interpretative cultural reading. Journalistic readings of the outfits of the Bush pair have not evolved around deconstructing cultural and political meanings as much as they have become towards more recent presidential couples.

This indicates that the press media logic at the beginning of the 21st century, although increasingly centred on more visual formulas of photography and television, was less centred on formulas of clothing. Presidential clothes occupied a less significant place in the visual culture and political analysis of the press. Furthermore, sartorial analysis of the Bush pair in journalistic visual culture would often be mobilised to create distinct party binaries, leading to political polarisation and conflict. This will be further explained in this chapter, which will assess the relationship between sartorial cultural analysis and politics.

2.1 The conservative note in presidential style

In the first era of the 21st century, journalists often refrained from sartorially debating presidential outfits of the Bush pair and only offered them a marginal place within journalistic visual culture. This raises the question why clothes were not (yet) an important part of the presidential image during the Bush administration. Two reasons can be given for the lack of media attention for the clothes of the Bush couple. Firstly, according to the press, the Bush pair did not employ clothes as a strategic communicative tool themselves. In contrast with the Obama administration, Laura and George Bush displayed a conservative style - an emblem of republicanism and tradition - that the press interpreted as being socially irrelevant, exclusive and thus less worthy of press discussion.¹¹⁰

Journalists have spoken of a 'well-kept', 'neutral' and 'mature' style, in which they recognised a conservative performance by the Bush tenure. This is quite an apt

¹¹⁰ Levine, Hallie. "A gown without the Texas twang." *New York Post*, 14 May 2001, <http://nypost.com/2001/05/14/lauras-look-will-liven-up-first-lady-set-for-fashion-makeover/>. Accessed 17 July 2017.

observation from the press as the clothes of the Bush administration followed Republican tradition by fulfilling a purely aesthetic rather than a storytelling role; they had a high-profile rather than a mid-market appeal. Their modest, regional and conservative style was more distant and uniformal, and spoke less to the common citizen and journalist. Their matronly and neat style hinted back to conventions American history, in which traditional gender roles were displayed and presidential administrations presented themselves as conventional role models for the nation. As Robin Givhan aptly observed in an article in the *Washington Post*, presidential pairs were historically known to display grandeur in their styles, and the style of the Bush pair was a late-21st century retrospective of this.¹¹¹ As the wealthy and high profile style of the Bush couple did not resonate and establish accessibility with mid-market journalists and citizens, it was subjected to scarce press analysis.

Particularly Mrs. Bush has been called out by the press for her conservative style.¹¹² For starters, Laura Bush has been known for wanting to come across as traditional in the first place; her caucasian features of white skin and blond hair immediately presented themselves as the stereotypical characteristics of a white-skin conservative First Lady, so this already opened up opportunities for Mrs. Bush to present herself as a hallmark of 'American whiteness' and reinforce this notion through her clothing. As such, Mrs. Bush used her conventional aesthetics as an opportunity to wear orthodox fashion. During her tenure the press framed Mrs. Bush as an icon of regionalism for wearing a small selection of high-profile designers (rather than wearing a wide commercial range), and for paying tribute to local Texan labels such as small couturier Michael Mcfaircloth.¹¹³ This exclusive distant style would, in the eyes of the press, be in sharp contrast with the later populist style of Michelle Obama, who would become known by journalists for wearing a wide range of mid-market designers that spoke to populism. In her exclusive role Mrs. Bush chose to reinforce her sovereign profile through wearing high-end labels from D.C.'s Seventh Avenue,¹¹⁴ rather than presenting herself as 'on of the people' through including accessible high-street labels. As such, Mrs. Bush' distant sartorial efforts were not

¹¹¹ Givhan, Robin. "Can Obama Elevate the Look of Presidential Downtime? We Can Only Hope." *Washington Post*, 26 Jul. 2009, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/07/23/AR2009072304042.html>. Accessed 16 July 2017.

¹¹²"1st Lady's the belle of ball - dumps her old frump on big night." *New York Post*, 21 Jan. 2005, <http://nypost.com/2005/01/21/1st-ladys-the-belle-of-ball-dumps-her-old-frump-on-big-night/>. Accessed 19 July 2017.

¹¹³ La Ferla, Ruth. "A gown without the Texas twang." *The New York Times*, 16 Jan. 2005, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/01/16/weekinreview/a-gown-without-the-texas-twang.html>. Accessed 16 July 2017.

¹¹⁴ Givhan, Robin. "Laura Bush, stepping out." *Washington Post*, 21 Jan. 2001, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A24999-2005Jan20.html>. Accessed 19 July 2017.

interpreted by the press as sympathetic towards the public and noteworthy, and were therefore not offered a significant role in journalistic visual culture.

Especially democratic media placed Mrs. Bush's style in a negative frame, and did not meet her high-profile distant look with much appreciation, as it did not align with their own democratic agenda. When Laura Bush became First Lady, the liberal *New York Times* discussed Mrs. Bush's sartorial display in a predominantly degrading manner: in January 2001 fashion journalist Ruth La Ferla wrote an article in which she reflected back on Laura Bush's style with a mocking undertone as being rather dull.¹¹⁵ La Ferla contented how Mrs. Bush's campaign wardrobe had consisted of 'tame suits and coats', while critically opting that throughout much of the campaign Mrs. Bush had been wearing monotone 'taupes and mochas.' She sarcastically set forth that 'much has been made of Mrs. Bush's conservative style.' In January 2005, La Ferla wrote another article on Mrs. Bush's inauguration wardrobe in which she demeaningly called Mrs. Bush 'a fashion regionalist' throughout the early years of her administration. 'Flaunting her Texas loyalties on her sleeve. ... she remained a resolutely red-state kind of woman, wearing the pastels and peacock blue and crimson favoured by Dallas society.'¹¹⁶ In another article, Betts degradingly connected Laura Bush's well-kept appearance to a traditional housewife role, describing Mrs. Bush as 'the first lady, who, with her soothing colours and neat presentation, is the fashion equivalent of meatloaf and rice pudding - comfort food.'¹¹⁷

Additionally, the press did not make Mr. Bush's style a telling part of his image either and presented him as a model of manhood. At the time of his administration between 2001 and 2007, the style of George Bush was rarely a matter of interest for newspapers. As such, the clothes of George Bush have been exposed to considerably much less journalistic sartorial interpretation. This was the case because, according to the press, Mr. Bush displayed a conservative Republican style that was consistent with the presidential masculine uniform and not particularly original or worthy of discussion.¹¹⁸

Much in line with his 'hyper masculine' presidency, Mr. Bush sought to reinforce journalistic image conventions of the hyper masculine President through his clothes. In her

¹¹⁵ La Ferla, Ruth. "TRANSITION IN WASHINGTON: THE WARDROBE; Designer Leads Mrs. Bush Toward a Brighter Style." *The New York Times*, 20 Jan. 2001, <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/01/20/us/transition-washington-wardrobe-designer-leads-mrs-bush-toward-brighter-style.html>. Accessed 16 July 2017.

¹¹⁶ La Ferla, Ruth. "A gown without the Texas twang." *The New York Times*, 16 Jan. 2005, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/01/16/weekinreview/a-gown-without-the-texas-twang.html>. Accessed 16 July 2017.

¹¹⁷ Betts, Kate. "VIEW; A New Day: Fashion Contemplates Fresh Icons." *The New York Times*, 28 Oct. 2001, <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/10/28/style/view-a-new-day-fashion-contemplates-fresh-icons.html>. Accessed 19 July 2017.

¹¹⁸ Givhan, Robin. "An image a little too carefully coordinator." *Washington Post*, 22 Jul. 2005, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/07/21/AR2005072102347.html>. Accessed 19 July 2017.

article *Can Obama Elevate the Look of Presidential Downtime? We Can Only Hope* Givhan related Bush's style, consisting of 'standard uniform classic suits', to a display of power and control.¹¹⁹ She held: 'The Oval Office attire of most presidents is virtually interchangeable, seeing as how they have all been men. Aside from Ronald Reagan's brown suits and Bill Clinton's low gorge Donna Karan ones, Presidents wear basic dark suits: nicely tailored, crisp white shirts, etc. The clothes convey a clear message of control and power.' Furthermore, Givhan contented that Bush's sartorial personality embodied a Western mythology of American greatness to once again emphasise power: 'George W. Bush was obsessed with Western style, favouring cowboy boots, belt buckles and hats whenever possible, and steering clear of anything that suggested familiarity with a certain Kennebunkport compound [a sailing village]. ... he used the mythology of the West to convey a sense of American greatness and confidence.' As Mr. Bush's conservative clothes were not very expressive and striking, they were deemed noteworthy enough to receive press coverage.

Taking into account the fact that press has not paid much attention to the conservative style of the Bush pair, their conservative presentation is not without downsides: although resembling sovereignty and power, their distant style does not appear to bridge the distance between voter and the presidency, nor does it promote accessibility to journalists. Therefore, projecting a conservative style to the press, may stimulate a media environment of separation and remoteness that lacks mutual understanding and political agreement. Although there is a persisting need for the President and the First Lady to be role models, and to present an impressive face to the world, there is apparently also a need from the press to recognise as sense of sympathy in the clothes of the presidential pair in order for journalists to write about it. This journalistic need was overlooked by the Bush pair; the couple thereby missed an opportunity to employ the sartorial in order to strengthen the relationship between the American presidency and the press.

2.2 The entertaining role of presidential style

The second reason the clothes of the Bush administration have not obtained a central place in press discourse is the fact that the press did not interpret the clothes of the Bush couple as a political language, and did not treat it as a form of cultural analysis, but merely as a form of entertainment. Journalists lacked to recognise clothes as cultural and

¹¹⁹ Givhan, Robin. "Can Obama Elevate the Look of Presidential Downtime? We Can Only Hope." *Washington Post*, 26 Jul. 2009, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/07/23/AR2009072304042.html>. Accessed 16 July 2017.

political objects because the Bush pair did not explicitly 'politicise' their clothes, and did not use their wardrobe as a vehicle to communicate political messages. Even though the clothes of George and Laura Bush were indeed expression of Republicanism and an example of the Republican country that they wanted to lead, their political significance did not go far beyond that. The pair's clothes were not recognised by the press as individual expressions of commitment to an idea, an argument, or an ideal, that had particular resonance. The pair preferred a professional style that had a aesthetic rather than political role and that did not recapture underlying meanings. As such, their clothes did not form an alternate and subconscious political language, that was in need of journalistic cultural deconstruction and should therefore be given a relevant place in journalistic presidential image making.

Especially Mrs. Bush was recognised by the press to be nondescript in the way she dressed, making sure not to overshadow the President. In contrast to Michelle Obama, Laura Bush did not employ dress to adapt to certain political environments through imitating the dress code of the country she was visiting. Mr. Bush, displaying a consistent uniform style, did not dress for his particular environment either. As such, the press did not interpret the clothes of the presidential pair as being engagements in public diplomacy and an amplification of the President's agenda; they did not recognise a public diplomatic narrative in the pair's clothes following official appearances. In this sense, the press did not only marginalise the presidential pair's wardrobe because of its conservative identity, but it also left the clothes out of political and public diplomatic discourse, while turning the role of First Lady into a decorative hostess job.

Taking into account these non-political meanings of presidential fashion, the journalistic visual language of presidential clothes in the first era of the 21st century evolved around aesthetics and was not an important part of political analysis. The visual language of the press during the Bush administration was much less deconstructive than the visual language in the Obama era; during the Bush administration sartorial analysis was more descriptive rather than interpretive. The press did not yet acknowledge that clothes encompass underlying political meanings that need to be entangled in support of overall political analysis.

In this sense, the visual language of clothes in the press at the time of the Bush tenure was similar to that of other visual languages, such as video journalism and photo journalism. Video journalism and photo journalism and other visual languages also often focussed on aesthetics and entertainment, rather than hidden political meaning that needed to be deconstructed and a process of active reinterpretation. This may correlate

with the fact that, at the beginning of the 21st century, press culture fulfilled a less interpretative role than it has been doing recently: back then social media - providing many differing sources of news and truth - was not as prominent, and there was thus less of a public need for interpretative journalism. This socio-historical circumstance may explain why journalists refrained from fulfilling an interpretative sartorial role during the Bush administration, and why they did not take upon a role as political analysts. At the time, the meaning of presidential clothes is journalistic image making represented a visual language that relied more on entertainment than political analysis.

2.3 Polarising journalistic agendas

Remarkably, journalistic sartorial analysis of the Bush pair has been leading to polarisation and differences in interpretation, whereby right-wing newspapers framed the Bush's conservative style in a positive manner, as it aligned with their own Republican agenda, and left-wing newspapers framed the same style in a negative manner, as it did not coincide with their Democratic agenda. This was especially the case with Laura Bush, as conservative newspapers used Mrs. Bush's visual conservatism to support their own Republican stance, and liberal media were likely to attack her conservative appearance.

Laura Bush's inaugural wardrobe in 2001 is an example of the polarising political debate First Lady fashion could cause between newspapers. During Laura Bush's first swearing-in ceremony, Mrs. Bush wore a peacock-blue suit with a calf-length coat and a contrasting brown collar, designed by a local and little-known Dallas couturier Michael Faircloth. Liberal newspapers recognised a Southern conservative performance in Mrs. Bush's outfits and were thereby quick to condemn the clothes for lacking excitement. In response to early sketches released the week before the Ball, chief fashion critic Robin Givhan from the Democratic *Washington Post* concluded in her January 2001 article *Laura Bush's conservative choice* that the sketches were 'Neither enthralling nor inspiring.' 'The designs recall a formality that has been shaken off by much of the fashion establishment. Instead, they call to mind images of Texas grandeur, good Southern breeding and Old World etiquette. Like the entire election, the designs are rather disappointing.'¹²⁰

In making this argument, Givhan sarcastically highlighted that Laura Bush's blue day suit was symbolic for the administration's repetitiveness: 'When the George W. Bush White House already is being reprimanded for being too much of a cut-and-paste of the elder Bush's administration, it would have been nice if the new first lady had steered

¹²⁰ Givhan, Robin. "Laura's conservative choice." *Washington Post*, 20 Jan 2001, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A24999-2005Jan20.html>. Accessed 17 July 2017.

completely clear of the hue [blue colour] that Barbara Bush made famous.’ The left-winged *New York Times* shared the same opinion. Journalist Emily Eakan wrote in her January 2001 article *Mrs. Bush it’s not about fashion* that - based on the sketches - ‘it’s unlikely that Mrs Bush’s inaugural attire will earn such rave reviews, or provoke such alarming demonstrations of fandom. Early responses have been decidedly tepid.’¹²¹

Right-wing media, on the contrary, had much appraisal for Mrs. Bush’ inauguration wardrobe and contrastingly framed her attire as glamorous and exciting. Already in the early beginnings of January, columnist Andrea Billups from *The Washington Times* used Bush's dress as an instrument to mark a class distinction between Democrats and Republicans: Her [Mrs. Bush’s] clothes convey that Mrs. Bush is well aware that the nation is eagerly anticipating a presidential style shift when she joins her husband at the White House Jan. 20. After a rocky start from outgoing first lady Hillary Rodham Clinton - who has since raised her profile with colourful variations on the working woman's pantsuit - Mrs. Bush, 54, enters the national and world stage without flash, but with a conservative sense of personal elegance.¹²² The right-winged *New York Post* shared a similar appreciative opinion. In an early January 2001 article called *Laura’s sexy red inaugural gown*, Libby Calaway from the *Washington Times* wrote another article in which she described how, in contrast to Hillary with her ‘ill-advised hairdos and awkward headbands’, Laura Bush’s blue swearing-in suit had returned style to the Washington capital. ‘Laura looks ready to give Washington DC a makeover.’¹²³

A similar debate between left-wing and right-wing media took place over Mrs. Bush’s chosen colour palette for the inauguration. Her blue suit and red dress resembled the colours of the American flag, and this was interpreted by newspapers as a gesture of patriotism. The liberal *Washington Post* met Mrs. Bush’s patriotism objective with honing sarcasm: ‘Perhaps it would have been too much to hope that the new First Lady would not feel compelled to pay homage to the American flag on Inauguration Day.’¹²⁴ The conservative *Washington Times*, however, was much more positive towards Bush’s colourful display of patriotism: ‘From a form-fitting beaded-lace red gown for the inaugural balls to a well-cut blue wool day suit and coat for the swearing-in ceremony, Mrs. Bush's

¹²¹ Eakin, Emily. “Mrs. Bush, it’s not about fashion.” *New York Times*, 20 Jan 2001, <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/01/20/arts/mrs-bush-it-s-not-about-fashion.html>. Accessed 21 July 2017.

¹²² Billups, Andrea. “Laura Bush will be the first lady in red.” *Washington Times*, 20 Jan 2001, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2002/jan/21/20020121-034954-3624r/>. Accessed 21 July 2017.

¹²³ Callaway, Libby. “Laura looks ready to give D.C. a makeover: new First Lady returns style to the capital.” *Washington Times*, 20 Jan 2001, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2002/jan/21/20020121-034954-3624r/>. Accessed 21 July 2017.

¹²⁴ Givhan, Robin. “Laura’s conservative choice.” *Washington Post*, 20 Jan 2001, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A24999-2005Jan20.html>. Accessed 17 July 2017.

selections are proving to be her bravest yet on the style front. ... This time, with the eyes of not just Texas but the whole world upon her, the one-time librarian will dazzle victoriously in patriotic red and peacock blue.¹²⁵

Furthermore, the implications of Mrs. Bush's chosen designer Michael Fairway were also debated by left-winged and right-winged media. On the one hand, the liberal *The New York Times* lampooned Bush's couturier Michael Fairway for being 'an obscure designer', mockingly referring to him as 'a Dallas designer who fashioned the French-cut leotards and micro-minis worn by the Dallas Cowboys cheerleaders', and thereby depreciating Mrs. Bush's Southern orientation.¹²⁶ On the other hand, Andrea Billups from *The Washington Times* applauded Bush's choice for local Texan designer Michael Faircloth: 'Designed by Dallas couturier Michael Faircloth, Mrs. Bush's inaugural fashions signal to the nation that the quietly confident Texas teacher knows who she is and what she wants.'¹²⁷

Left-winged and right-winged newspapers took the polarising debate over the conservative style of the Bush pair one step further, by using politicians' sartorial choices to create political binaries. In January 2001, when Laura Bush was about to be inaugurated, columnist Suzanne Fields from the *Washington Times* wrote the column *Fashionably Mature* in which she lauded Laura Bush's Southern and 'mature' sartorial choices and meanwhile downplayed First Lady Hillary Clinton's 'headbands' and 'pantsuits' from the previous Democratic administration: 'It's finally so: We've got a first lady who's willing to dress to risk making a fashion statement. No tacky headbands, silly brimmed hats or repetitive black pantsuits. We're talking curves over cleavage, red rather than blue, and Dallas over New York,' Fields lauded. Fields also framed Laura Bush's curvy figure as a breath of fresh air against the liberal 'emaciated gaunt look': 'Washington fashion is notoriously banal, if not downright dreary, and formal wear is no exception. But, mercifully, Laura Bush comes to town when the waif-like emaciated gaunt look is gone, and she can enjoy being stylish.' As such, Laura Bush's conservative performed style was used by journalists to draw up political battle lines between Republican and Democrats. In this sense, Fields strategically relied on politician's sartorial choices to mark a political distinction in terms of clothing between the Republican and the Democratic party.

¹²⁵ Billups, Andrea. "Laura Bush will be the first lady in red inaugural gown called 'glamorous.'" *Washington Times*, 19 Jan 2001, <http://m.washingtontimes.com/news/2006/apr/1/20060401-090505-3332r/>. Accessed 21 July 2017.

¹²⁶ Levine, Hallie. "A gown without the Texas twang." *New York Post*, 14 May 2001, <http://nypost.com/2001/05/14/lauras-look-will-liven-up-first-lady-set-for-fashion-makeover/>. Accessed 17 July 2017.

¹²⁷ Billups, Andrea. "Laura Bush will be the first lady in red inaugural gown called 'glamorous.'" *Washington Times*, 19 Jan 2001, <http://m.washingtontimes.com/news/2006/apr/1/20060401-090505-3332r/>. Accessed 21 July 2017.

The fact that sartorial press analysis of the Bush pair created hostility and binaries between left-wing and right-wing parties rather than unification becomes clear in more examples. In an August 2004 article, Ginia Bellafante, also a critic of the left-winged *New York Times*, marked a clear party difference between Republican candidate Laura Bush and her competing Democrat candidate Teresa Heinz Kerry based on how well kept their appearances were. She contented that, in contrast to the free spirited Teresa Heinz Kerry - 'a woman with a taste for a 70's-era Jacqueline Bisset coiffure and a habit of tossing a sweater over her shoulders' - Laura Bush sought to look imperturbably well kept. 'After nearly four stressful years in the White House, Mrs. Bush's smile remains dependably attractive, her hair neatly clipped and her neutral suits, one indistinguishable from the next, are as proper as schoolgirls' uniforms.'¹²⁸ Bellafante concluded that First Lady style marked a competition between republicans and democrats. 'A sorts has intensified following the Democratic National Convention -- this one over the many contrasts in taste and appearance and comportment between the potential first ladies. It is a pageant that many might prefer did not exist, but which nonetheless occupies a corner of voters' minds.'

Furthermore, Suzanne Fields from the *Washington Times* used sartorial analysis to juxtapose Bush as a liberalising symbol of postfeminism with feminist Hillary Clinton, who she ought to be constrained by feminism: 'It's possible that Laura Bush can enjoy a certain freedom and flair in her clothes because she isn't bound by the feminist uniform that constricted Hillary Clinton before she finally said to heck with it and sat for that *Vogue* magazine shoot. Hillary's signature '60s style as the Arkansas governor's wife, which she brought remnants of to Washington, was the feed-sack granny dress with granny glasses. We've grown up some since then, and post-feminism has liberated women to be stylishly curvaceous, deliciously decorative, frankly feminine, appealing once more to men while accentuating the differences of the sexes.'¹²⁹

Moreover, The conservative *Washington Times* cleverly made use of sartorial vocabulary to depict a similar vivid contrast between competing First Ladies Republican Laura Bush and Democrat Heinz Kerry during the presidential race in 2004. This highlights how sartorial vocabulary has been used by newspapers to create different political performative identities and political binaries. Through sartorial descriptions in her October column *The Presidents 'secret weapon* Allis West framed Laura Bush as being effortlessly

¹²⁸ Bellafante, Gina. "It Didn't Start With Jackie: First Lady Style Makes Waves." *New York Times*, 3 Aug 2004, <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/08/03/nyregion/it-didn-t-start-with-jackie-first-lady-style-makes-waves.html>. Accessed 22 July 2017.

¹²⁹ Fields, Suzanne. "Clothes make the First Lady." *Washington Times*, 15 Jan 2001, <http://m.washingtontimes.com/news/2006/apr/1/20060401-090505-4446r/>. Accessed 22 July 2017.

modest and elegant: '[Mrs. Bush's] chestnut hair perfectly coifed, her grey suede pumps unscuffed and understated, her pastel blue coat and paisley shawl comfortably stylish, the 58-year-old former schoolteacher has been deployed by the Bush campaign to do what she does best: make undecided voters fall in love with her. She usually does her own hair, unless there's a hairdresser around... She keeps her wardrobe in blue garment bags, and keeps her personal opinions to herself.'¹³⁰

In contrast to sartorially framing Laura Bush as elegant, *The Washington Times* used sartorial vocabulary to frame Democrat Heinz Kerry as high-maintenance and unconventional: '[Mrs. Kerry] has lots of diamonds and is given to wearing espadrilles on the rope line. She loves shoes, and sports spike-heeled Jimmy Choos with confidence. Her clothes, from such trustworthy labels as Armani, while designer, are not regarded as couture. [She has]... Hermes bags ... and \$4,000 Chanel suits. ... No more twin sets. Blowy hair, brassy mouth and bossy boots. ... Some Washington insiders say Teresa Heinz Kerry would make an unconventional first lady. Is mainstream America ready for federally funded botox clinics?'¹³¹ As such, in the early years of the 21st century, the clothes of First Lady Laura Bush were treated by the media as weapons in a competition between the Democratic and Republican Party, and as symbols of feminism and postfeminism. They performed identities of red and blue, that were used to divide up journalistic (visual) culture.

With regard to George Bush - in spite of the fact that his clothes were not subjected to as much political analysis - his clothes have also been used by the press as political instruments to create battle lines between Democrats and Republicans. The liberal *New York Times* has made use of President Bush's style to depict a political dichotomy between Bush's 'formal' Republican administration and Bill Clinton's previous 'business casual' Democratic administration. In the June 2001 article *At Oval Office, The Suit Rules For Bush, Formality Matters* the newspaper denoted that Bush was known to wear suits from Oxxford, a Chicago-based company known for 'very serious, luxurious suits with more handworked details than any branded suit in the world.'¹³² The newspaper used Bush's display of these serious and formal suits as an example to make the argument that, whereas President Clinton 'ran a White House of late-night cramming sessions, youthful

¹³⁰ West, Allis. "The President's 'secret weapon.'" *Washington Times*, 25 Oct 2004, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2004/oct/25/20041025-011433-9527r/>. Accessed 22 July 2017.

¹³¹ West, Allis. "Polite society anticipates Teresa's pizzazz." *Washington Times*, 22 Oct 2004, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2004/oct/22/20041022-120846-3334r/>. Accessed 22 July 2017.

¹³² International Herald Tribune. "At Oval Office, The Suit Rules For Bush, Formality Matters." *New York Times*, 27 Jun 2001, <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/06/27/news/at-oval-office-the-suit-rules-for-bush-formality-matters.html>. Accessed 22 July 2017

informality and accepted business casual,' Bush's dress code emphasised a sartorial formality, with which would also come 'a greater sense of dignity and sobriety connected to the office of the presidency:' 'Suits are no longer being shunned as vigorously as they were during the glory [Clinton] days of business casual. ... [President Bush's] sartorial policy is part of a broader, subtle shift in the way that men are dressing for business. When Bush announced his new dress code, he indicated that part of his reasoning was that with sartorial formality would also come a greater sense of dignity and sobriety connected to the office of the presidency. Not only are the clothes more solemn but the atmosphere is much more straitlaced.'

Taking these binary-imposing characteristics of presidential sartorial discussion in journalism into account, the journalistic sartorial analysis of the conservative style of the Bush pair has driven newspapers apart, and has caused political disharmony. The cultural phenomenon of clothes in journalistic image making therefore represents an interesting tension in journalistic culture, whereby it can divert media over their political agendas. The visual conservatism of the Bush pair provided a basis for political views to collide. The discussion of the pair's clothes in the press had a symbolic party-clashing power that evoked hostility with the (liberal) opposition. In this way, the visual conservative language of clothes, although not directly being a form of political analysis, eventually becomes political. The sartorial language becomes a political domain that draws up party boundaries and battle lines. Given the fact that liberal media have attacked the conservative style of the Bush pair, visual conservatism has failed to win over liberal media and lead to harmony. Presidential clothes in journalistic image making can thus present themselves as a prolongment of political party stance points, enforcing party polarisation. As parties appeal to strongly demarcated positions, they employ the visual language of clothes to endorse these positions, and counter the opposition. This polarising tendency of presidential clothes that diverts newspapers is an emblematic example of the polarising political environment that has been colouring American society for centuries.

2.4 Hyper masculinity and hyper femininity in presidential press presentation

Through making clothes an important part of presidential image making in the Bush era, the press has not only been stimulating a polarising political environment, but it has also been reinforcing the historical portrayal of traditional gender roles. As laid forth in chapter one, the press has played a significant role in depicting a traditional gender dichotomy between the President and the First Lady, whereby they both operate in separate spheres. The journalistic focus on the conservative clothes of the presidential

Bush pair, as an important part of their image, has led to a reaffirmation of this gender dichotomy. Analysing the sartorial press discussion over Mr. and Mrs. Bush marks a gender discrepancy between the President and the First Lady in the first decennium of the 21st century, whereby the First Lady was expected by the press to perform a predominantly aesthetic gender role, and the President was expected to rather preoccupy himself with substantive political matters, while rarely being exposed to commentary over his appearance.

For starters, the (lacking) preoccupation of the press with George Bush's clothes has reaffirmed his traditional gender role. The press preferred to frame George Bush as a figure who occupied himself with politics rather than style, by marginalising discussion on the clothes that he was wearing and mocking him if he overstepped traditional gender norms. The lacking attention of the press for the clothes of Mr. Bush may well be the result of Bush's projected hyper masculine presidential style, which automatically debunked opportunities for a more feminine oriented sartorial discussion, and for a different way of approaching the presidency.

It was only when George Bush overstepped the hyper masculine sartorial conventions of the black suit that he could count on sartorial discussion, in which he was immediately attacked by the press. When Mr. Bush wore a pair of black Crocs with socks in June 2007 - along with a pair of black shorts, a white camp shirt, and a baseball cap - as he was heading out from the White House to ride his bike, he was subjected to much scrutiny by the leftist *Washington Post*. In the article *By Executive Order, Crocs Aren't Chic* Givhan fiercely set forth that 'Bush's decision to wear black socks with his Crocs was ill-considered. The combination makes one think of an old man on his way to the beach. Besides, the shoes were conceived for use on boats. The holes allow air to circulate and water to drain. And the non-slip bottoms offer stability. Pairing them with socks is a contradiction.'¹³³ This indicates that the press relied on sartorial analysis to constrain the president to the traditional gender role of manhood.

Equally, the press has treated Laura Bush as an aesthetic figure whose value was dependent upon her appearance. As such, her role as a political actor and an authoritative figure was once again undermined. The press did not recognise political meaning in Laura Bush's clothes, and she was all the while reduced to a traditional aesthetic gender role through a constant focus on appearance. She was not predominantly framed as someone who engages in politics; rather her clothes overruled the substance conversation and she

¹³³ Givhan, Robin. "By executive order, crocs aren't chic." *Washington Post*, 22 Jun 2007, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/06/21/AR2007062102403.html>. Accessed 24 July 2017.

was posited as bolstering the president's image. During the Bush tenure, there appeared to be an automatic inclination of the press to focus on the aesthetics and clothes of the First Lady as opposed to the clothes of the President, which makes this mechanism gender determined.

All together, this sartorial treatment of the presidential couple reaffirms the traditional historical climate of femininity and masculinity. Through its visual culture, the press was once gain placing the Bush presidency within its long-hauled Victorian constraints. This points at a greater gender problem that is being reinforced by the media, in which a masculine and feminine ideal remained to exist in the first era of the 21st century. This gender outcome was in line with the political outlook of the Bush pair as discussed in chapter one, as their tenure did not make an attempt to challenge traditional gender roles.

Ultimately defining the relationship between sartorial cultural analysis and politics, it becomes clear that the politicalisation of image culture, through sartorial analysis, was a conservative cultural phenomenon at the beginning of the 21st century. There was a conservative tendency to stimulate a traditional gender division through a conventional focus on the sartorial. In this sense, the media reinforced its traditional depiction of gender roles in image culture and remained conservative. Moreover, the analysis of clothes had a diverting political outcome as it created paths for political party polarisation, thereby stimulating a hostile political climate. The visual conservative language of presidential clothes in the press thereby enforced political tradition and barriers.

Conclusion

In the Bush era, presidential clothes played a predominantly aesthetic role in journalistic image making and were marginalised because of an underlying media logic that was not focussed on the sartorial. On the one hand, the Bush pair has refrained from using their clothes to embody political meaning and on the other hand, the press has not been treating the clothes of the Bush couple as a new form of cultural analysis. Yet, the journalistic sartorial discussion of the presidential Bush pair has had a clear political outcome, as the press has used their clothes to endorse their own political agendas and to create political juxtaposition between parties. According to the press, the clothes of Mr. and Mrs. Bush have been vehicles of visual Republican conservatism. This visual conservatism is dividing in the sense that it places newspapers within their party boundaries and affirms differences. The pair's clothes were used to mark a distinction

between red and blue, tradition and modernism, postfeminism and feminism, and the South and the North.

In this sartorial image making process left-winged media were generally inclined to frame the Presidential pair's style in a condescending manner, while using a mocking tone of voice, whereas right-winged media placed the pair's appearances in an elegant frame and held up an appreciative tone of voice. Consequently, the visual conservative style of the Bush pair has been endorsed by right-wing newspapers and condemned by right-winged newspapers, which has been leading to polarisation, undermining ritual symbolic unity and common ground between media. Rather than being frivolous, clothes thereby become representative of political weapons that draw up battle lines, stimulating hostility. Presidential clothes are used as instruments to mark political differences between parties, rather than stimulate harmony. In this sense, the visual language of clothes is no longer merely a symbolic invention of the media, but all the more a political strategy to promote a newspaper's own political agenda with a conservative tendency. Sartorial analysis in journalistic visual culture thereby becomes a new form of political campaigning. The visual language of clothes thus represents an interesting tension in journalistic culture, whereby it can divert or unite media over their political agendas.

Furthermore, sartorial journalistic analysis in the Bush age has been reinforcing the traditional presidential gender dichotomy. As laid out in chapter one, the press has historically been playing a large role in enforcing traditional gender roles, in which the President operates in the public sphere and the First Lady in the private sphere. The sartorial discussions in press culture over the Bush couple have reaffirmed this functioning of the president and first lady as icons of masculinity and femininity. Additionally, Mrs. Bush was subjected to much more sartorial analysis than President George Bush, pointing at a gender bias in the first decennium of the 21st century press, whereby the First Lady was easily cast into a traditional gender role that focussed on expectations of appearance. This shows the press' resistance towards the broader social trend in which men and women are increasingly operating in 'each other's fields', and in which gender boundaries are becoming blurred.

The broader relevance of this recent development in the press indicates that society in the first era of the 21st century remained encapsulated by a conservative (media) culture. The constraints of gender roles and political parties were once again visualised in the press through sartorial analysis of the Bush pair. A subtle hostility was arising. In the journalistic analysis of the Bush's pair's conservative clothes, men and women and diverting political angles found ways to focus on their differences and disparities. This

conservative trend in sartorial analysis hindered a soothing political climate. This is a critical trend for American society, where a strong political polarisation and gender dichotomy has already marked and divided society for centuries. The focus on the presidential pair's conservative clothes within the press during the Bush administration thus had a significant cultural tendency, in which it hindered political and social progress.

Chapter 3: Sartorial meanings in the journalistic image making of Mr. and Mrs. Obama

Introduction

The press has made the sartorial choices of the Obama pair a much more significant part of the presidential image than the clothes of the Bush pair. Whereas the clothes of Laura and George Bush were often only marginally mentioned in articles, journalists have become more common in the Obama era to dedicate entire articles to the style of the presidential pair and to conduct more in-depth analysis on underlying meanings. Almost every official appearance and dress of Michelle Obama has been exposed to sartorial coverage in at least one of the four newspapers and Barack Obama's outfits have been discussed much more often than those of George Bush. The *New York Times* has reflected back on the Obama's in a May 2017 article as 'masters of the sartorial statement',¹³⁴ and the *Washington Post* equally concluded in a 2016 item that Michelle Obama was 'a fashion icon',¹³⁵ who has changed presidential fashion.

This indicates that the press media logic of the last decennium has not only become increasingly centred on more visual formulas of photography and television, but also on textual-visual formulas of clothing. Presidential clothes have indeed obtained a prominent place in the contemporary visual culture of the press. This is a revolutionary development in visual culture, as this new aspect of media's visual culture is different in the sense that it consists of texts rather than images. Even though visual culture has historically been associated with the visual, the textual medium is now for the first time gaining momentum. The new textual sartorial phenomenon in journalistic visual culture has many gender and political implications, whose outcomes are opposite to those of the Bush tenure, as will be explained in this chapter.

3.1 The democratisation of presidential style

The increasingly prominent place of clothes in visual culture and journalistic image making - where journalists sartorially debate almost every presidential outfit - immediately raises the question why clothes have suddenly become such an important part of the presidential image in the last era, and more particularly during the tenure of the Obama's.

¹³⁴ Friedman, Vanessa. "How clothes make the first lady." *New York Times*, 27 May 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/27/insider/melania-trump-political-fashion.html>. Accessed 24 July 2017.

¹³⁵ Givhan, Robin. "First lady Michelle Obama serves as fashion icon." *Washington Post*, 21 Jan. 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/27/insider/melania-trump-political-fashion.html>. Accessed 26 July 2017.

Two reasons can be given for the sudden media attention for the presidential pair's clothes. Firstly, according to the press, the Obama's have been paying more attention to presidential clothing themselves. In contrast with the Bush administration, Barack and Michelle Obama have displayed an iconoclastic democratic and populist style that the press has interpreted as being more socially relevant, inclusive and worthy of discussion.¹³⁶ This is quite an apt observation from the press as the clothes of the Obama's are unique from different administrations in the sense that they have fulfilled a storytelling rather than an aesthetic role, as will be explained in this chapter. In comparison, the Bush administration was subjected to much less press analysis following the display of a modest, regional and conservative style that was more distant, uniformal and spoke less to the common citizen.

The increasingly populist style of the Obama's can also be related to modernising times, in which traditional gender depictions are broken down - as set forth in chapter one - and in which presidential administrations are presenting themselves as increasingly populist. Robin Givhan aptly observed in an article in *The Washington Post* that 'Obama cannot display the old-money, preppy informality of John F. Kennedy. In the years that followed Kennedy, people have become increasingly suspicious of grandeur and of highfalutin ways. Looking too dashing can be problematic.'¹³⁷ This also explains why the wealthy and rich style of the Bush couple was subjected to scarce and rather negative press analysis, while the democratic populist display of the Obama's has received much journalistic appraisal.

Particularly Mrs. Obama has been praised by the press for her democratic and populist style. For starters, Michelle Obama has been known for not wanting to come across as traditional; her dark body immediately challenged the notion of a white-skin conservative First Lady, so this already opened up opportunities to present herself differently. As such, Mrs. Obama used her unconventional aesthetics as an opportunity to wear more expressive unorthodox rather than conservative fashion. During her tenure the press framed her as an emblematic icon of populism for wearing a multitude of wide-ranging designers (rather than relying on an exclusive few), for casually 'buying online', and for paying tribute to independent, commercial and financially struggling labels such as

¹³⁶ Friedman, Vanessa. "Michelle Obama's Dress May Have Looked Simple, but It Spoke Volumes." *New York Times*, 26 Jul. 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/27/fashion/michelle-obama-christian-siriano-democratic-national-convention.html>. Accessed 26 July 2017.

¹³⁷ Givhan, Robin. "Can Obama Elevate the Look of Presidential Downtime? We Can Only Hope." *Washington Post*, 26 Jul. 2009, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/07/23/AR2009072304042.html>. Accessed 16 July 2017.

Narciso Rodriguez, Prabal Gurung, Barbara Tfank and Target.¹³⁸ This relatable style was in the eyes of the press in sharp contrast with Laura Bush, who was known by journalists for having worn a small range of expensive and exclusive distant designers that journalists and their readers could not identify with.

In her exclusive role Michelle Obama could have chosen to ooze a sense of high-profile sovereignty through wearing only high-end labels from Washington D.C.'s Seventh Avenue, but she refreshingly chose to do the opposite and presented herself as 'one of the people' through including accessible high-street labels; this was interpreted by the media as unprecedented, groundbreaking and sympathetic towards the middle class.¹³⁹ For example, Mrs. Bush's often worn Texan couturier Michael Mcfaircloth resonated much less with ordinary citizens than Mrs. Obama's often worn high street brand H&M. Mrs. Obama's remark 'Ladies, we know J. Crew. You can get some good stuff online,' has been widely evoked in the press for its sympathy and accessibility.¹⁴⁰ As such, Mrs. Obama's populist sartorial efforts were interpreted as noteworthy by the press and she started to play a communicative role unseen before in journalistic visual culture.

In the January 2017 article *What Michelle Obama wore and why it mattered* Vanessa Friedman from *The New York Times* lauded Michelle Obama's habit to wear affordable labels such as J. Crew and H&M - thereby identifying with regular citizens - as 'a new approach to the story of dress and power.'¹⁴¹ In the November 2016 article *Michelle Obama didn't like to discuss her clothes, but they spoke volumes* Robin Givhan from *The Washington Post* equally observed how Mrs. Obama's unconventional democratic style spoke to all people: 'Her [Mrs. Obama's] clothes were unexpected: a cardigan to meet Queen Elizabeth II. ...They evoked Everywoman: hiking shorts at the Grand Canyon. The pictures are captivating.'¹⁴² Mrs. Obama's display of a variety of labels was all the more interpreted by the media as a sympathetic gesture to help the American economy. Vanessa Friedman from *The New York Times* set forth in the December 2012 article *First in Fashion* that: 'Unlike some of her predecessors, Mrs. Obama did not wind up

¹³⁸ Friedman, Vanessa. "What Michelle Obama wore and why it mattered." *New York Times*, 14 Jan. 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/14/fashion/michelle-obama-first-lady-fashion.html>. Accessed 29 July 2017.

¹³⁹ Idem.

¹⁴⁰ Billups, Andrea. "Michelle Obama wears it well." *Washington Times*, 2 Nov. 2008, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2008/nov/2/michelle-obama-wears-it-well/>. Accessed 26 July 2017.

¹⁴¹ Friedman, Vanessa. "What Michelle Obama wore and why it mattered." *New York Times*, 14 Jan. 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/14/fashion/michelle-obama-first-lady-fashion.html>. Accessed 29 July 2017.

¹⁴² Givhan, Robin. "Michelle Obama didn't like to discuss her clothes, but they spoke volumes.." *Washington Post*, 23 Nov. 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/michelle-obama-didnt-like-to-discuss-her-clothes-but-they-spoke-volumes/2016/11/21/1d3bb19e-9f84-11e6-a44d-cc2898cfab06_story.html?utm_term=.d43786e6742f. Accessed 29 July 2017.

designating a few designer favourites to create a consistent image. She wore clothes by more than 50 design firms. She recognised the traps of being associated with a materialistic industry. She is seen as helping the American economy.¹⁴³

Much like the left-wing, the right wing also acknowledged and appreciated Mrs. Obama's populist style, recognising a sense of power in this refreshing display. Andrea Billups from the right-winged *Washington Times* laid out in the November 2008 article *Michelle Obama wears it well* that 'Mrs. Obama has soared to the top of best-dressed lists and has been a much-in-demand cover model for women's magazines, which have touted her graceful but accessible personal style, wearing everything from upscale designers to mass-marketed H&M frocks.'¹⁴⁴ Liza Mundy from the *Washington Times* went on to state in a 2008 article that, partly through her fashion, Mrs. Obama had become more than just the candidate wife: 'A tough climb into glitzy world of money, power, privilege where the self-styled working class girl resolutely stands her ground, speaks her mind and frequently deflates her husband.'¹⁴⁵ As such, it was not only the left wing that appreciated Mrs. Obama's gesture of left-wing populism, her populist efforts also resonated with the right-wing.

The press has also made the clothes of Barack Obama a far more substantial and telling part of his image than the clothes of George Bush. This has been the case because, according to the press, Obama's democratic and populist style with a casual and 'cool' edge has been quite a different departure from George Bush's consistent masculine uniform and displayed Western mythology of American greatness - as previously theorised in an article by *Washington Post* journalist Robin Givhan. In contrast to her mockeries of George Bush, Givhan has appreciatively commented on Mr. Obama that his easy populist style makes him an emblem of the new economy: 'Obama has not found a foolproof casual wardrobe that combines accessibility with clout, that mixes ease with presidential authority. When Obama wears a suit jacket over a polo shirt or with an open-collar dress shirt, he strikes just the right note. He looks like a Silicon Valley titan, a player in the new economy. And in this bad economy, that's a look that's reassuring.'¹⁴⁶ As Mr. Obama's clothes were expressive and defied from the standard uniform this resulted in more press

¹⁴³ Friedman, Vanessa. "First in fashion." *New York Times*, 28 Dec. 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/30/fashion/michelle-obama-first-in-fashion.html>. Accessed 29 July 2017.

¹⁴⁴ Billups, Andrea. "Michelle Obama wears it well." *Washington Times*, 2 Nov. 2008, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2008/nov/2/michelle-obama-wears-it-well/>. Accessed 26 July 2017.

¹⁴⁵ Mundy, Liza. "More than the candidate's wife." *Washington Times*, 5 Oct. 2008, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2008/oct/5/more-than-the-candidates-wife/>. Accessed 28 July 2017.

¹⁴⁶ Givhan, Robin. "Can Obama Elevate the Look of Presidential Downtime? We Can Only Hope." *Washington Post*, 26 Jul. 2009, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/07/23/AR2009072304042.html>. Accessed 16 July 2017.

coverage. Furthermore, much like his 'unisex' presidency, Mr. Obama has tarted image conventions of the hyper masculine male in the press with his clothes. Obama's attempt to at times dress in an a-typical male style has even been framed by the media as 'feminine.' When Barack Obama appeared in wide jeans at the the first pitch of the 2009 MLB All Star Game, Julieann McKellogg from the the leftist *Washington Post*¹⁴⁷ and Ben Wolfgang from the rightist *Washington Times*¹⁴⁸ both wrote an article in which they mocked his 'mom jeans.'

Yet, in spite of the fact that sartorial populism bridges the distance between voter and the President and promotes accessibility, it may also undermine presidential sovereignty. Robin Givhan from *The Washington Post* has shortly touched upon this matter. Following the appearance of Barack Obama in wide jeans at a basketball game, she claimed: 'The public's recent fascination with the unfortunate dungarees President Obama wore to throw out the first pitch at the All-Star Game in St. Louis reveals how conflicted folks can be about the silent symbolism of the commander in chief when he is not in formal Oval Office attire. Few people want him to look like he spends his afternoons thumbing through his subscriber editions of *GQ*. But most folks would like to think he has at least heard the phrase "dress for success." The need for the President to make people feel better about themselves, to present a dynamic and impressive face to the world, persists. The President still has to look a cut above at all times.'¹⁴⁹ Givhan's commentary touches upon the important and new fine line that needs to be walked between looking accessibly populist while also making sure not to undermine presidential sovereignty. This balance, and the pitfalls of how sartorial populism may undermine an impressive look, is a matter the press has largely overlooked amidst its appraisal. There is still room left for the press to tap into this matter and explore this downside of visual populism.

3.2 The politicalisation of presidential style

The second reason the clothes of the Obama administration have obtained such a central place in press discourse is the fact that the press itself has started to interpret the clothes of the presidential pair as a political language, and treat it as a new form of cultural analysis. Journalists have been doing so because the Obamas have 'politicised' their

¹⁴⁷ McKellogg, Julieann. "Obama has retired the mom jeans." *Washington Post*, 22 May. 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/reliable-source/wp/2014/05/22/obama-has-retired-the-mom-jeans/?utm_term=.78ba7eb77a8f. Accessed 23 July 2017.

¹⁴⁸ Wolfgang, Ben. "Obama has retired the mom jeans." *Washington Times*, 22 May. 2014, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2014/may/22/obama-michelle-got-rid-of-my-mom-jeans/>. Accessed 23 July 2017.

¹⁴⁹ Givhan, Robin. "Can Obama Elevate the Look of Presidential Downtime? We Can Only Hope." *Washington Post*, 26 Jul. 2009, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/07/23/AR2009072304042.html>. Accessed 16 July 2017.

clothes and have used them as a vehicle to communicate political messages. Because the pair's clothes have come to form an alternate and subconscious political language, they have now become a more relevant component in journalistic presidential image making. As such, the sartorial cultural references are inherently political.

In addition, a clear difference can be marked between how leftist and rightist newspapers write about clothes, whereby the sartorial visualisations of left-winged newspapers are much more in depth and extensive than those of the right wing. It is predominantly left-winged media that treat the presidential pair's clothes as a form of (political) cultural analysis: The liberal *New York Times* and *Washington Post* dedicate longer articles to the clothes of the presidential pair and its underlying meaning than the conservative *Washington Times* and *New York Post*; the articles usually evolve around outfits in its entirety, whereas right-winged media often only touch upon clothes as a marginal subject. This was not only the case during the Democratic Obama administration but also during the previous Republican Bush administration. *The Washington Post* and *New York Times* are also unique in the fact that they have their own fashion critic. A solid explanation for this remarkable difference is that leftist media employ more journalists that occupy themselves with cultural analysis, and are thus more likely to frame clothes as a form of cultural analysis. Correlatively, most academia are also leftist rather than rightist. This is an interesting observation, as these leftist academia and newspapers thus play a particularly important role in evoking sartorial analysis to be a new important language.

In the politicalisation of the presidential pair's clothes, the press has particularly called out Michelle Obama's responsibility. In January 2017 Vanessa Friedman from *The New York Times* reflected back on Mrs. Obama's sartorial efforts: 'Mrs. Obama set in motion a strategic rethink about the use of clothes that not only helped define her tenure as First Lady, but also started a conversation that went far beyond the label or look that she wore. No one understood the role of fashion, and the potential uses of that, better than the First Lady. She could plant subliminal cues to the latter with her clothes. Her clothes were representative of the country she wanted to lead and an expression of commitment to an idea, or an ideal, that had resonance.'¹⁵⁰ *The New York Post* added that the press interpreted Mrs. Obama's political sartorial outlook as a remarkable different departure from previous First Ladies, in which she exhibited a professional style that had a political rather than an aesthetic function: 'First Ladies have traditionally tried to be nondescript in the way they dressed - they didn't want to overshadow their spouses ... or be seen as

¹⁵⁰ Friedman, Vanessa. "What Michelle Obama wore and why it mattered." *New York Times*, 14 Jan. 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/14/fashion/michelle-obama-first-lady-fashion.html>. Accessed 29 July 2017.

spending a lot on clothing. But she had no inhibitions in that sense. She really had an impact on how professional women dressed, and how you could have fun with fashion, in a way that you couldn't imagine Rosalynn Carter or Barbara Bush ever doing.¹⁵¹ Mr. Obama was also recognised by the press to use dress to adapt to his political environments, through imitating the dress code of the country he was visiting. In the June 2017 article *In High Style, Obama Returns to the World Stage* Guy Trebay from *The New York Times* has set forth that 'However you judged his politics, mr. Obama's uniform was unfailingly appropriate to the setting. In that he hewed to an abiding sartorial rule: dress for you environment. It's a simple enough proposition and yet one that many seem to ignore.'¹⁵²

In addition, the press has interpreted the clothes of the presidential pair as being engagements in public diplomacy and an amplification of the president's agenda. Following every official appearance the media were quick to recognise a public diplomatic narrative in the pair's clothes. *The New York Times* made the case for Michelle Obama that 'her wardrobe was representative of the country her husband wanted to lead. ... she made something of an art out of pairing designers with countries during state dinners or trips, wearing, for example, Mr. Khan, an Indian-American designer, to the India state dinner, and Mr. Ford, an American designer then based in London, when she dined with Queen Elizabeth II at Buckingham Palace.'¹⁵³ When Mrs. Obama wore a gown from Italian fashion label Gucci to the Kennedy Center Honors on the same day Italy went to the polls to vote on a referendum, this was widely viewed by journalists as a verdict on Matteo Renzi, the country's now former reformist prime minister. Obama's clothes were subsequently interpreted by the press as an argument against isolationism and in support of allies around the globe.¹⁵⁴ With regard to Barack Obama, *The New York Times* equally took note of the time when mr. Obama abandoned his 'uniform style' and wore a buttoned

¹⁵¹ "Why the fashion industry will miss Michelle Obama." *New York Post*, 26 Dec. 2016, <http://nypost.com/2016/12/26/how-the-fashion-industry-will-miss-michelle-obama/>. Accessed 29 July 2017.

¹⁵² Trebay, Guy. "In high style, Obama returns to the world stage." *New York Times*, 5 Jun. 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/05/fashion/mens-style/barack-obama-style-italy.html>. Accessed 29 July 2017.

¹⁵³ Nikas, Joanna. "Michelle Obama's diplomatic wardrobe." *New York Times*, 29 Apr. 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/29/fashion/michelle-obamas-diplomatic-wardrobe.html?mtrref=www.google.nl&gwh=50F4C1A359812F2329DB27D9079EB339&gwt=pay>. Accessed 29 July 2017.

¹⁵⁴ Friedman, Vanessa. "At the Kennedy Center Honors, Michelle Obama Makes an Italian statement." *New York Times*, 5 Dec. 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/05/fashion/kennedy-center-michelle-obama-gucci-italian-referendum-matteo-renzi.html?mtrref=www.google.nl&gwh=E6D4B57F05DCD9C7DA8CB8565A320F13&gwt=pay>. Accessed 30 July 2017.

down blouse when speaking at a climate summit in Milan to bond with the Italians, referring to this as ‘the full Italian.’¹⁵⁵

In this sense, the press has not only given the wardrobe of the Obama’s a place in journalistic image culture because of its populist identity, but has also placed their wardrobe at the heart of political and public diplomatic discourse, while turning the role of First Lady from a traditionally decorative hostess job into a piece of diplomatic art. Taking into account these political meanings of presidential fashion, clothes have come to form an entirely new visual language in the press that exceeds aesthetics, and in fact forms an important part of political analysis. For starters the visual language of the press during the Obama administration is much more deconstructive than the visual language was in the Bush era; during the Bush administration sartorial analysis was more descriptive rather than interpretive.

In remarkable contrast to the Bush era, the press now considers presidential clothes to be an important part of political analysis, and this recognition is build upon the premise that there is a deliberate strategy behind a politician’s clothes. ‘Is it sillier to acknowledge the strategy behind appearance, or to pretend such influences don’t exist?’ Vanessa Friedman from *The New York Times* has set forth in a May 2017 article on the style of Michelle Obama.¹⁵⁶ Furthermore, the press has acknowledged that clothes indeed encompass underlying political meanings that need to be entangled in support of overall political analysis. *The New York Times* has laid out: ‘It’s not that what she wears matters more than world peace or freedom of the press or trade policy or any piece of legislation — of course not. And *The Times* covers those issues with dedication. One kind of [political] analysis does not obviate the other, an can, in fact, elucidate it. We [journalists] score the First Lady’s wardrobe for as to who she is as a person and how she sees her role; where her values lie and how she will represent the country on the world stage. Where her husband’s (perhaps understated) priorities lie.’¹⁵⁷ *The Washington Times* has also backed up this perspective from a right-wing stance point. The newspaper held in a June 2008 article that ‘fashionable attire often communicates more information about personal image

¹⁵⁵ Trebay, Guy. “In high style, Obama returns to the world stage.” *New York Times*, 5 Jun. 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/05/fashion/mens-style/barack-obama-style-italy.html>. Accessed 29 July 2017.

¹⁵⁶ Friedman, Vanessa. “How the clothes make the First Lady.” *New York Times*, 27 May. 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/27/insider/melania-trump-political-fashion.html>. Accessed 30 Jul 2017.

¹⁵⁷ Idem.

and ambition than words because clothing sends [sociopolitical] signals about taste and status that are not necessarily expressed in words.¹⁵⁸

This makes the contemporary visual language of clothes in the press far different from other visual languages, such as video journalism and photo journalism. Video journalism and photo journalism often focus on scandal and sensationalism as opposed to a hidden political meaning that needs to be deconstructed. Although staged photo opportunities are also a part of photo journalism, they are often not subjected to as much in-depth political analysis and interpretation; it remains the photographic surface that counts and little deconstruction is provided by journalists. In contrast, the modern visual language of clothes has increasingly started to revolve around a process of active reinterpretation by the press.

This reinterpetative process correlates with a more interpretative rather than an objective written press culture, of which levels have been rising and continue to keep rising since the 20th century. Especially in the current age of social media, where new media have come to form an alternative source of news and truth, it has been recognised by journalists that there is a greater public need for such interpretative journalism. In the case of sartorial cultural analysis, journalists even continue to exceed their interpretive role; their status is lifted to that of political analysts and commentators. However, it also has to be noted that the current place of the pair's clothes in press discourse does not only have political value and is not only used for political analysis, but is also discussed by journalists for entertainment purposes. Not every sartorial discussion of the presidential couple is political. The political meaning of clothes in journalistic image culture is a nuanced phenomenon that walks the fine lines between political science and entertainment.

3.3 Unifying journalistic agendas

The journalistic sartorial analysis of the populist style of the Obama's has polarising as well as unifying effects on newspapers. At times sartorial analysis may lead to polarisation amongst liberal and conservative newspapers, much like often happened during the Bush administration in response to their conservative gender portrayal. This is still especially the case with Barack Obama, as conservative media are likely to attack the feminisation of democratic men. When Mr. Obama appeared in a tan coloured summer suit rather than his conventional black suit in his newsroom to address the press in August 2014 - thereby overstepping traditional hyper masculine gender expectations - he was

¹⁵⁸ Chasmar, Jessica. "Why Michelle Obama is wearing this jacket." *Washington Times*, 23 Jun. 2008, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2017/apr/28/why-michelle-obama-is-wearing-this-jacket>. Accessed 30 Jul 2017.

subjected to much scrutiny. Whereas Cheryl Chumley from *The Washington Times* stated with much negativity that the 'doubling down was in reference to a tan suit Mr. Obama wore to his press conference Thursday to give remarks on Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and the growing threat from the terrorist Islamic State group — a suit seen by many as way too casual for so somber a presentation. The president's overall message on White House policy was largely lost in the talk of the tan suit,¹⁵⁹ Elahe Izadi from the liberal *Washington Post* was much more lauding of Obama's 'feminine' display: 'There is nothing wrong with that suit. It says more about official, federal, political Washington that anything other than a dark suit with a white shirt and red tie counts as some sort of aesthetic heresy. That is a conservative two-button suit in a colour that is perfectly appropriate for the time of year and the occasion.'¹⁶⁰

Following the unusual display of Obama, a substance versus style debate broke out amongst media over the tan suit and the audacity of taupe - some held that it was a faux-pas for a president to wear an unusual tan, and cheery colour while speaking of world crises, while others held that the president was in his normal right to deviate from the standard uniform during the airy summer months. Alexandra Petri from *The Washington Times* recognised strategy of political distraction in the suit: 'Perhaps the suit was actually a brilliant manoeuvre. It wasn't all that loud, but it still spoke so much louder than the president's words. We were so completely overcome by the suit that we failed to hear the president saying that "we don't have a strategy" until hours later.'¹⁶¹ Ultimately the President himself sought to quiescence the criticism and contented that the sartorial display had not been a mistake. *The Washington Times* reported that White House press secretary Josh Earnest had made clear that 'the President stands squarely behind the decision he made yesterday to wear his summer suit.'¹⁶²

However, although polarising at times, the new populist style of the Obama's has all the more been leading to a unification amongst liberal and conservative newspapers and a shared populist appreciation. For starters, liberal journalists have used this visual populism to support their own democratic stance and promote their own political agenda. For

¹⁵⁹ Chumley, Cheryl. "Haters be damned, Obama stands 'squarely behind' decision to wear tan suit." *Washington Times*, 29 Aug. 2014, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2014/aug/29/obamas-tan-suit-stays-white-house-says/>. Accessed 30 Jul 2017.

¹⁶⁰ Izadi, Elahe. "Twitter nation distraction by president's tan suit." *Washington Post*, 29 Aug. 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2014/08/28/nation-distracted-by-presidents-tan-suit/?utm_term=.63766cd3b557. Accessed 30 Jul 2017.

¹⁶¹ Petri, Alexandra. "Following suit on President Obama's tan monstrosity." *Washington Post*, 29 Aug. 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/compost/wp/2014/08/29/following-suit-on-president-obamas-tan-monstrosity/?utm_term=.bf613462ce58. Accessed 30 Jul 2017.

¹⁶² Chumley, Cheryl. "Haters be damned, Obama stands 'squarely behind' decision to wear tan suit." *Washington Times*, 29 Aug. 2014, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2014/aug/29/obamas-tan-suit-stays-white-house-says/>. Accessed 30 Jul 2017.

example, when Mrs. Obama wore a bronze Atelier Versace gown at her final state dinner as First Lady, the liberal *New York Times* read in Mrs. Obama's gown a performance of female strength, and thus female emancipation. The newspaper held: 'In Versace, Michelle Obama Sends a Powerful Message at Her Final State Dinner. As much as [the gown] was gracefully cut and draped, it also spoke of armour and female strength, of the need to gird yourself to fight for what you believe in.'¹⁶³ *The Times* related this message of female strength to the designer of the dress: 'It was designed by Donatella Versace, a woman who was famously thrust into one of the most difficult situations of all: having to take over and preserve the company founded by her brother after his murder in Miami. And who, despite a fair number of doubts, has ultimately triumphed — in part by transforming the aesthetic of her company from one built on the power of sex to one built on the power of self.'

It should not come as a coincidence that this article was written amidst the heat of the presidential elections, in which *The New York Times* was a strong Hillary Clinton advocate, a woman who also sought to be a symbol of female victory. As such, *The Times* echoed its stance in the election and its political preference through what Mrs. Obama had been wearing. The article voiced the political climate of female triumph that Hillary Clinton was trying to create. Mrs. Obama herself may have also deliberately intended to voice this message and cause this reaction in the press, as she was also an explicit Hillary Clinton supporter in the elections.

Furthermore, in May 2016, *The New York Times* wrote an article to mark a sartorial power distinction between Democrat Barack Obama and his Republican runner-up Donald Trump, thereby endorsing the democrat perspective.¹⁶⁴ In this article on 'the tie divide', the newspaper juxtaposed Barack Obama's 'new-look' custom to rarely ever wear a tie with Trump's 'old-look' custom to always wear a tie. In the newspaper's opinion, not wearing a tie stood for a strong work ethic and 'making politics more human.' These are two important points on the democratic agenda. Through this observation, the article promoted accessibility and left-wing populism. In contrast to Obama, who did not wear ties, the article described Trump as 'a political outlier when it comes to image.' The piece sarcastically set forth that Trump's display of traditional ties and clothes referred to 'the last time Republicans actually believed they could make America great again.'

¹⁶³ Friedman, Vanessa. "In Versace, Michelle Obama Sends a Powerful Message at Her Final state dinner." *Washington Times*, 19 Oct. 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/20/fashion/in-versace-michelle-obama-sends-a-powerful-message-at-her-final-state-dinner.html?mtrref=www.google.nl&gwh=CDA6BF3D1383172E4331E66CACD29D2C&gwt=pay>. Accessed 1 Aug 2017.

¹⁶⁴ Friedman, Vanessa. "Trump vs. the disappearing tie." *New York Times*, 11 May 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/12/fashion/donald-trump-barack-obama-ties.html>. Accessed 1 aug. 2017.

As such, *The New York Times* used ties to juxtapose an outdated Republican political system with a modernised and refreshing Democratic political system. The newspaper thereby forwarded its own political belief that Mr. Trump was an outlier in the political race, an emblem of outdated Republicanism and unqualified to win the presidential elections. Through a subtle sartorial analysis of something as minor as ties the newspaper subconsciously oozed the message that the future belonged to the Democratic party. Through choosing not to wear a tie, Mr. Obama may have deliberately intended present himself as a symbol of progression and modernism, and cause this reaction in the media.

Notably, conservative media have met the democratic sartorial display of the Obama's with equal positivity, which indicates that sartorial analysis does not always have to reflect the political colour of the newspaper and may even contradict the newspaper's political agenda. Whereas the conservative party is supposed to embrace (sartorial) traditions, they were very welcoming towards the refreshing democratic sartorial stance of the Obama's, and the iconoclastic idea that First Ladies could wear commercial brands rather than designer brands. As such, conservative media are equally appreciative of visual populism.

For example, the right-winged *New York Post* paradoxically promoted the democratic perspective through Mrs. Obama's sartorial choices in the December 2016 article *Why the fashion industry will miss Michelle Obama*: 'Michelle Obama embraced everyone. She embraced black designers, Asian designers, European designers. ... She was very democratic in her choice of clothes. And that includes wearing fashion that ordinary women could potentially afford - like cardigans from the retailer J. Crew. She's made an effort to wear accessible fashion.'¹⁶⁵ In the January 2013 article *Michelle Obama wears Wu to the balls* Samantha Critchell from the *Washington Times* adopted a similar perspective: 'The Obamas seem to understand that the fashion industry is a driving force in the U.S. economy and that its lobby is a powerful one. They don't treat fashion frivolously. ... The first lady is so supportive of so many American designers.'¹⁶⁶ *The Washington Times* equally met Mrs. Obama's democratic sartorial attitude with positivity in the November 2008 article *Michelle Obama wears it well*: 'For the first time perhaps, an American political figure, albeit a candidate's wife, has stepped out in garments that real-

¹⁶⁵ "Why the fashion industry will miss Michelle Obama." *New York Post*, 26 Dec. 2016, <http://nypost.com/2016/12/26/how-the-fashion-industry-will-miss-michelle-obama/>. Accessed 29 July 2017.

¹⁶⁶ Critchell, Samantha. "Michelle Obama wears Wu to the balls again." *Washington Times*, 21 Jan. 2013, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2013/jan/21/michelle-obama-wears-wu-to-the-balls-again/>. Accessed 1 August 2017.

life women can purchase at the mall, and they are responding to her get-real savvy for dressing.¹⁶⁷ With regard to Barack Obama, Cody Jones from the liberal *New York Post* similarly resonated in the article *Obama has never looked better* that ‘Barack Obama may well go down as our most stylish president’, while speaking of its sartorial ‘cool side’.¹⁶⁸

This marks an interesting paradoxical departure in journalistic visual culture whereby conservative newspapers are caught in contradiction: they are not particularly fond of the democratic presidency as a whole, yet speak admiringly of the First Lady’s style, and her democratic performance in particular. A sartorially lauding headline of *The Washington Times* such as *Michelle Obama wears it well*¹⁶⁹ is in sharp contrast with other politically condemning headlines such as *Why President Obama is wrong*,¹⁷⁰ *Obama is the Worst president ever*,¹⁷¹ and *The very angry First Lady Michelle Obama*.¹⁷² This sartorial contradiction also accounts for the *New York Post*: a headline such as *Obama has never looked better*¹⁷³ is quite contradictory with headlines such as *Barack Obama is officially now a parasite*,¹⁷⁴ *Obama is the worst president since WWII*,¹⁷⁵ and *Michelle Obama’s oblivious ‘pride’*.¹⁷⁶ This phenomenon is also in vivid contrast with journalistic coverage of the Bush administration, where the democratic press was condescending rather than lauding towards the conservative republican style of the First Lady, often leading to polarisation amongst the different newspapers. The cultural phenomenon of clothes in journalistic image making therefore represents an interesting tension in journalistic culture,

¹⁶⁷ Billups, Andrea. “Michelle Obama wears it well.” *Washington Times*, 2 Nov. 2008, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2008/nov/2/michelle-obama-wears-it-well/>. Accessed 26 July 2017.

¹⁶⁸ Jones, Cody. “Obama has never looked better.” *New York Post*, 9 Mar. 2017, <http://nypost.com/2017/03/09/obama-has-never-looked-better/>. Accessed 2 August 2017.

¹⁶⁹ Billups, Andrea. “Michelle Obama wears it well.” *Washington Times*, 2 Nov. 2008, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2008/nov/2/michelle-obama-wears-it-well/>. Accessed 26 July 2017.

¹⁷⁰ Gingrich, Newt. “Why president Obama is wrong.” *Washington Times*, 14 Jun. 2016, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2016/jun/14/why-president-obama-wrong/>. Accessed 2 August 2017.

¹⁷¹ Curl, Joseph. “Obama is the worst president ever.” *Washington Times*, 2 Jul. 2014, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2014/jul/2/curl-obama-is-the-worst-president-ever/>. Accessed 2 August 2017.

¹⁷² Curl, Joseph. “The very angry first lady Michelle Obama.” *Washington Times*, 30 Oct. 2011, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2011/oct/30/curl-the-very-angry-first-lady/>. Accessed 2 August 2017.

¹⁷³ Jones, Cody. “Obama has never looked better.” *New York Post*, 9 Mar. 2017, <http://nypost.com/2017/03/09/obama-has-never-looked-better/>. Accessed 2 August 2017.

¹⁷⁴ “Barack Obama is officially now a parasite.” *New York Post*, 8 Sep. 2016, <http://nypost.com/2016/09/08/barack-obama-is-officially-now-a-parasite/>. Accessed 2 August 2017.

¹⁷⁵ Earle, Geoff. “Obama is worst president since WWII: poll.” *New York Post*, 2 Jul. 2014, <http://nypost.com/2014/07/02/obama-worst-president-since-wwii-poll/>. Accessed 2 August 2017.

¹⁷⁶ Malkin, Michelle. “Michelle Obama’s oblivious pride.” *New York Post*, 20 Feb. 2009, <http://nypost.com/2008/02/23/pride-patriotism-did-obama-dis-the-us/>. Accessed 2 August 2017.

whereby it can divert or unite media over their political agendas, and whereby newspapers can be inclined to promote a different political agenda than their own.

In this sense, sartorial analysis may unite newspapers with different political agendas. It provides a common ground in which populism exceeds differences and in which all political views can share. The discussion of the pair's clothes in the press has a symbolic party-exceeding power that evokes sympathy with the (conservative) opposition. In this way, the visual populist language of clothes eventually becomes a-political. The sartorial language is politically meaningful, but it is also a domain that can exceed party boundaries. Given the fact that conservative media have also embraced the democratic style of the Obama's, it can also win over conservative media with its sartorial leftist populism and lead to journalistic unification. Even though parties appeal to strongly demarcated positions, the visual language of clothes has a symbolic party-exceeding power that evokes sympathy with the opposition. This new unifying and progressive tendency marks a clear difference with the visual sartorial language during the Bush administration, where clothes were not a part of driven populism, but much more party endorsing and polarising. The Obama's have sought to define clothes in a more national and broader way. Whereas the visual language of clothes during the Bush administration diverted media, the new language during the Obama administration has been unifying them.

3.4 The presidential presentation press paradox

Through making clothes an important part of presidential image making in the Obama era, the press has not only been working towards unification, but it has also been affecting its usual portrayal of traditional gender roles. An interesting paradoxical development can be observed, which will be named 'the presidential presentation press paradox.' As laid forth in the first chapter, the press has played a significant role in depicting and reinforcing a traditional gender dichotomy between the President and the First Lady, where they both operate in separate spheres. However, the new focus on the clothes of the presidential pair, as an important part of their image, has led to a blurring of this gender dichotomy. As the press recognises political messages in the sartorial style of the First Lady, it has re-represented her as a political actor and authoritative figure, who engages in politics, speaks her political opinion and dominates the substance conversation through her clothes - rather than merely bolstering the President's image. As the press has started to read political statements in the First Lady's clothes, the press has brought the lady from the domestic into the public sphere. This phenomenon is in sharp

contrast with sartorial coverage of Laura Bush, whose style was merely presented by the press as fulfilling an aesthetic role and who was thereby placed in a traditional gender role.

Equally, the increasing preoccupation of the press with Barack Obama's clothes has led to a 'feminisation' of the President. This development has led away from the press' preference to frame the President in a hyper masculine way, who occupies himself with politics rather than aesthetics and style. The President is no longer only ought to preoccupy himself with hyper masculine affairs, but the media has opened up an opportunity for the president to be stylish and to have a place in the sartorial debate. Yet, it has to be noted that this growing focus of the press on the style of Obama, as opposed to Bush, may also be the result of Obama's unisex presidential style. His depiction of a more unisex style automatically opens up more opportunities for a sartorial discussion, and for a different way of approaching the American presidency. All together, the focus of the press on clothes in presidential image making points to a greater revolutionary changing climate of femininity and masculinity, whereby the press is subduing its own traditional gender dichotomy. Through the new focus on clothes, the press is modernising the American presidency and freeing it from long-hauled Victorian constraints.

However, although sartorial press analysis has led to an emancipation of traditional gender roles, the press has meanwhile also been reinforcing these traditional roles through the same mechanism. This is the other side of the 'presidential presentation press paradox.' There is an automatic inclination of the press to focus on the aesthetics and clothes of the First Lady as opposed to the President, which makes this mechanism gender determined. Although recognising political autonomy in the First Lady's clothes, she is also all the while reduced to a traditional aesthetic gender role through a constant focus on appearance. Meanwhile, although the President has 'feminised' through a growing focus of the press on the president's appearance rather than his politics, he is also subjected to much scrutiny when he ends up overstepping masculine dressing norms of the 'uniform suit'. For example, when Mr. Obama paired his outfit a [tote] bag in March 2016, Helena Andrews-Dyer from *The Washington Times* wrote an article in which she called mr. Obama's unconventional tote bag a 'sartorial record scratch'¹⁷⁷ and held that the bag had ruined his 'otherwise cool outfit.' This points at a greater gender problem that is all the while being reinforced by the media.

¹⁷⁷ Andrews-Meyer, Helena. "Forget Trump's wiretapping claims, inquiring minds want to know about Barack Obama's tote bag." *Washington Post*, 6 Marc. 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/reliable-source/wp/2017/03/06/forget-trumps-wiretapping-claims-inquiring-minds-want-to-know-about-barack-obamas-tote-bag/?utm_term=.9313fbada4be. Accessed 3 August 2017.

As such, while the cultural phenomenon of clothes in journalistic image making challenges gender barriers, it also tries to reduce the presidential pair back to their traditional masculine and feminine gender roles. A masculine and feminine ideal remain to exist and a sartorial struggle takes place in journalistic visual culture between tradition and emancipation. Hence, a paradoxical development occurs in presidential presentation by the press, whereby a representation of the President's clothes expands and reinforces traditional gender roles at the same time. This correlates with the previous paradox that the First Lady already found herself in, of representing an 18th century Victorian ideal, while also responding to a modern society, as Gil Troy observed. The contemporary presidential presentation press paradox is another lucid example of this earlier observed contradiction. As such, although Michelle and Barack Obama have made a successful attempt at challenging traditional gender roles, they are eventually also constrained by press framings.

Hence, ultimately defining the relationship between sartorial cultural analysis and politics, it becomes clear that the politicalisation of image culture, through sartorial analysis, is a progressive cultural phenomenon. Although there is a times a conservative tendency to stimulate a traditional gender division through a conventional focus on the sartorial, the gender dichotomy is all the more disrupted and the First Lady is presented as a newly emancipated political actor through fashion. In this sense, the media is abandoning its traditional depiction of gender roles in image culture and is becoming more progressive. Moreover, the political analysis of clothes does not lose strength through being 'a bit of everything', but it rather creates new possibilities amongst all newspapers for democratic populism. The populist language of clothes thereby exceeds party differences and appeals to materially universal matters, moving the journalistic environment forward in a progressive way.

Conclusion

In the Obama era, presidential clothes have become important instruments in journalistic image making. On the one hand, the Obama's have politicised their clothes themselves and on the other hand, the press - which is increasingly playing an interpretive role - has been treating the clothes of the presidential pair as a new form of cultural analysis. The cultural references of this sartorial phenomenon appear to be inherently political, as the press recognises signs of public diplomacy, political sentiment and an amplification of the political agenda in the pair's clothes.

According to the press, the clothes of Mr. and Mrs. Obama have become new vehicles for democratic populism. This visual populism is unique and powerful in the sense that it is capable to win over hearts outside party boundaries; it does not only appeal to party angles, but also manifests itself outside the realm of political domains and sentiments and thereby becomes a-political. Consequently, the visual populist style of the Obama's has been endorsed by both left- as well as right-winged newspapers, and has thereby been leading to unification, enforcing ritual symbolic unity and common ground between media. Rather than being frivolous, clothes thereby become representative of party-exceeding national symbolism. In this sense, the visual language of clothes is no longer merely a symbolic invention of the media, but all the more a political strategy to unify. This new unifying and progressive tendency marks a clear difference with the visual sartorial language during the Bush administration. Back then, clothes were not a part of driven populism, but much more party endorsing and polarising. The visual language of clothes thus represents an interesting tension in journalistic culture, whereby it can divert or unite media over their political agendas.

Additionally, sartorial journalistic analysis under Obama has been modernising in the sense that it has challenged the traditional presidential gender dichotomy. As laid out in chapter one, the press has historically enforced traditional gender roles, in which the President operates in the public sphere and the First Lady in the private sphere. The First Lady was framed to occupy herself with domestic matters rather than politics. The recent politicalisation of the First Lady's clothes, however, have allowed her to increasingly speak her political opinion and engage in politics in her own way. Additionally, the increasing focus on the clothes of the President enables him to cross over from the public sphere into the private sphere. This is indicative of a trend in which the presidential pair's gender roles are becoming more fluid. As the President and First Lady function within journalism as role models for the nation, this sets into motion a broader social trend in which men and women are increasingly operating in 'each other's fields.'

In conclusion, this recent development in the press indicates that society is working towards a more harmonious, unifying and progressive media culture. In journalistic analysis of the presidential pair's clothes, men and women and diverting political angles may find a way to 'get along' and move forward beyond their (party) disparities. This is a promising and positive trend for American society, where a strong political polarisation and gender dichotomy has marked the society for centuries. Particularly during the last political election there has been much upheaval and division, but this trend in sartorial analysis shows potential for a calmer political climate, in which parties can start to focus on finding

common ground. The focus on the presidential pair's clothes within the press thus has a very significant cultural tendency, in which it is moving towards a more progressive and a-political culture.

Conclusion

This thesis has demonstrated that the discussion of presidential clothes in visual press culture is a new and important form of text-based, rather than three-dimensional, visual culture in political image making with an entirely new visual language. Furthermore, it is a new form of cultural analysis in journalistic image making that has far-exceeding gender and political implications. An insight has been gained into what the visual language of clothes in journalism implies and particularly how it incorporates a telling relationship with gender roles and politics. Overall, it has appeared that the contemporary media logic has become increasingly centred on formulas of presidential fashion.

In making these observations, this paper has first analysed in chapter one how the academic historiographies of gender and journalistic visual culture have looked at the role of gender in politics, and subsequently in chapter two and three how the clothes of the Bush and Obama couple have formed a part of journalistic image making in relation to gender and politics. It has been demonstrated in chapter one that gender has played a significant role in journalistic visual culture since the 20th century, in which journalists have been reinforcing a traditional gender dichotomy, and in which the relationship between gender and clothes has been neglected. Furthermore, it has been found in chapter one that the Bush administration and the Obama administration have been antithetical in their display of gender roles, whereby the Bush couple values conservative tradition and the Obama couple emphasises emancipation. This administrative gender role difference translates into differing sartorial mechanisms in journalistic visual culture, that have had opposite political and gender outcomes for both administrations, as has been found in chapter two and three.

Strikingly, whereas fashion is often considered a frivolous topic in academic scholarship, presidential clothes have been treated as all but frivolous in the press, playing a significant role in visual culture. Clothes have become a way to express sentiments in journalism, especially with regards to politics. Sartorial analysis is used to endorse the political perspective of a newspaper, be it Democratic or Republican; to express a certain political opinion; to frame the aligned party in a favourable way and to frame the political opposition in a hostile way. Presidential clothes are thereby mobilised by the press as instruments to mark a sharp political contrast, and as weapons to draw up political battle lines. This shows that something as aesthetic as clothes has the power to bring about a party competition (conservative versus liberal). Clothes thereby become important components of a political press strategy, and a symbolic interpretation of political

campaigning. As such, the often overlooked clothes of the presidential pair form a perhaps surprising but nonetheless crucial component of journalistic political analysis. This thesis therefore wants to conclude with the argument that visual culture emancipates fashion as a serious matter, and that clothes should become a serious part of research on political culture.

What's more, while this thesis has argued that the sartorial is becoming a serious political phenomenon, it has also demonstrated that presidential clothes in the press incorporate an implicit and close relationship with gender. Through a focus on clothes the First Lady is reduced by the press to the aesthetic role model of womanhood that history has portrayed her to be, while the President is framed in a masculine manner through a sartorial conservative favourability. This sustained gender dichotomy is in line with the observed historical trend in chapter one, in which the press has historically been framing the presidential couple as role models of conservative manhood and womanhood. Yet, it also contradicts the subtle emancipating gender trend that has been occurring. It goes on to point at a hint of sexism in contemporary journalism, whereby the press frames women in an inferior way, marginalising their political importance and turning them into aesthetic objects. As such, clothes are a new form of visual culture that do not only emancipate fashion as an important phenomenon, but also reintroduce sexism. Fashion in visual press culture thus also shows that powerful women are victims of sexist analysis.

Yet, whereas the Bush administration was especially sexist, sartorial press analysis during the Obama administration has also allowed for an increasingly emancipating gender trend. Through a focus on the political meaning of Michelle Obama's clothes, the press is starting to increasingly frame the First Lady as an autonomous political actor, and is allowing her to break free of her domestic constraints. This is contrast with how the press approached the conservative style of Laura Bush, and shows a promising opportunity for First Ladies to become genuine political activists through their clothes. Meanwhile, through an increasing focus on the President's [Barack Obama] clothes, the press has also been freeing the President from its hyper masculine constraints that were so apparent during Mr. Bush's tenure. This paradoxical gender relationship of presidential fashion, whereby the press enforces traditional gender roles and challenges them at the same time, has been coined the 'presidential presentation press paradox.'

The new emancipating and gender challenging trend of presidential fashion in journalistic image making under Obama is surprising, as chapter one showed that journalistic image culture ultimately still prefers to place the presidential couple within a traditional gender frame. The liberalising power of clothes in visual culture thus marks a

sharp difference with the conservative gender culture of the press, and thereby becomes a promising phenomenon of social emancipation in the media. This thesis thereby contends that clothes in journalistic visual culture are telling of changing gender trends within society, and should - in spite of previous historiographic negligence - be an acknowledged part of gender and press historiography.

Interestingly, this paper has gone on to find that presidential sartorial analysis in press culture has had far exceeding polarising as well as unifying political outcomes on media culture. Whereas the conservative style of the Bush pair polarised newspapers and led to hostility, the democratic populist style of the Obama's was received by all newspapers as a vehicle of democratic populism, of which all newspapers were appreciative. While the conservative style of the Bush couple drew up political battle lines in the press, newspapers were able to find a common ground in the democratic populist style of the Obama's. As such, sartorial analysis of American presidential couples in journalistic image making creates possibilities for democratic populism so that it appeals to universal matters, and brings into life a visual language that is party exceeding.

This visual language is so party-exceeding that it eventually becomes a-political. Sartorial analysis can hence enforce ritual unity and counteract polarisation. It is thus in something previously-considered as 'shallow' as clothes that opposing political parties can in fact find party-exceeding national symbolism, and set a first step towards a more harmonious and productive sociopolitical culture. This is indicative of a trending progressive media culture, and shows the possibility for presidential clothes in journalist visual culture to unify and heal the political wounds that have divided the American nation for a long time.

The capabilities of presidential clothes to be vehicles of democratic populism, political harmony, feminism, and social emancipation go on to show a potential for future presidencies across the world to tap into the power of clothes in order to maintain a favourable relationship with the press and its citizens. It would be especially valuable for the contemporary Trump administration to start using fashion as a vehicle for democratic populism, as they are already dealing with a rather problematic political image - with substantial hostile media coverage as a result. If President Donald Trump and First Lady Melania Trump were to display a visual populist style and if they would mobilise their clothes as a sympathetic accessible visual language to communicate with the press, this could have more harmonious outcomes for their image. More importantly, it could aid in mending the fragile relationship between the Trump tenure and the media.

Adding to the debate on the effects of visual culture on political image making, whereby scholars disagree to which extent substance and democracy are now subverted by image, this thesis points out that clothes as a new form of text-based visual culture do not lead to a simplification of the political message. Rather, they add another in-depth dimension that requires political deconstruction. This thesis thereby contradicts scholars such as Jay Blumler, Michael Gurevitch, and Neil Postman, who have contented that the contemporary image-system in politics has led to impoverished coverage about serious issues. Discussing clothes in relation to politics is indeed a form of 'entertainment' and 'spectacle' and 'optics' as they have argued, but this study shows that this visual phenomenon can also still evolve around deep thought and reflection.

Furthermore, contradicting the previous strand of scholars, such as Michael Robinson, Nathaniel Persily, and Stuart Ewen, who has argued that visual culture leads to a degeneration of democracy, this thesis in fact points out that the visual press language of the sartorial all the more can lead to a rejuvenation of democracy, as it can function as a vehicle of visual populism. The argument of this thesis is thus more situated in the works of Jeremy D. Meyer and Aid Kunstman who have argued that the visual orientation in politics bridges the distance between politicians and citizens. Clothes thereby become a new and powerful democratic and populist tool to communicate with the media, that politicians could benefit from greatly.

In drawing this conclusion, the concepts of framing, gender roles, and media logic have all appeared to be relevant and supportive in this analysis, and have helped to shape the academic argument that politics, clothes, image and gender are closely interrelated in the press and telling of political and gender constructions in society. This conclusion, however, is not without limitations. For starters, this research has only looked at outcomes on *politics* and *gender*. For future research it would be interesting to examine what effect clothes in journalistic visual culture have on other elements, such as race and class. Furthermore, the pool of newspapers examined for this thesis has been rather small. A future larger study on more press outlets, or perhaps even visual media outlets, with a wider variety of political orientations, could provide further insight into whether this conclusion holds true or has other implications within other media. Furthermore, it would be insightful to conduct research on how sartorial journalism has responded to other presidential administrations. Especially the current Trump administration has been subject to much journalistic sartorial scrutiny, so researching this matter in more depth could provide further insight into the direction that sartorial press analysis of American presidential couples is currently heading in.

But for now gender and visual press historiography should start by acknowledging what has already been examined in this thesis: it is time to give presidential style the academic respect it deserves and recognise that presidential clothes are vehicles in journalistic visual culture that have widely varied political and gender-specific outcomes, depending on whether the administration is Republican or Democratic and whether the style displayed is conservative or populist. Through the press presidential clothes can bring about opposite sentiments of traditional conservatism as well as democratic populism, of polarisation as well as unification, of political disharmony as well as harmony, of sexism as well as feminism, and of restraint as well as liberation. This tensionous sociopolitical power of presidential clothes in press discussions is fascinating, and defies a new and revolutionary turn in visual press culture. This phenomenon should therefore become an esteemed part of visual cultural analysis. A dress and a suit do say more than a thousand words.

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