LUXURY VS. FASHION

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Abstract*: Nowadays, contemporary society is dominated by the logic of consumerism, brought forward through the fashion industry. Western culture and lifestyle are inevitably caught in a race of consumption and constant renewal, a race generated by the existence of fashion and trends, irrespective of individuals' geographic location, age or gender. There is a single element that I personally consider is not aligning to the dominant characteristics within the universe of fashion, at that is luxury. Fashion and luxury, as concepts, may be confused or even are confused and interpreted by consumers in general. In this context, I consider that delimitation at a theoretical level is appropriate and sound in order to bring certain clarity and define the different elements that lead to antagonistic concepts of luxury and fashion. The two notions represent, at first, elements pertaining to different paradigms presented in further details within this writing.*

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Today's society is dominated by a consumerist logic which is mostly brought out by fashion and advertising.

In Western countries, culture and the way of life in their entirety are integrated unavoidably in a race of consumerism and permanent renewal, a race that has been started by the very existence of fashion and trends. Regardless of where individuals are geographically positioned and whatever their age or gender, fashion has managed to become the star of the contemporary society.

There is one single element which I personally consider to be off the prevailing track of this race imposed by the world of fashion: luxury, to be more specific.

Notionally, luxury may be mistaken for fashion; they are mistaken for each other by both consumers and theoreticians alike. As far as I am concerned, the confusion of luxury and fashion is something that the very fashion industry players are deliberately perpetrating in order to position themselves on the fashion market in ways that are more likely to benefit them by camouflaging fashion under the appearance of luxury.

In the specialty publications, various authors refer to the high-quality fashion industry quite persuasively in terms of the "luxury goods industry". Theoretician Cesare Amatulli also says that: "A powerful corporate culture must exist behind any deluxe fashion brand [...]". (Amatulli 2005: 91, my translation)

Phrases like *fashion's luxury brand* may represent, in my opinion, nothing more than oxymoronic constructions that do nothing but confuse consumers.

Actually, writer Loredana Ivan also noted the wish of companies to place their own products as close to the luxury area as possible and explained that:

> [...] starting with the 1990s, the consumer goods market has grown permanently and a good number of goods and services are considered "luxury items", a fact which points to how interested companies are in placing their goods and services in the luxury category. (Petcu, 2015: 85, my translation)

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Therefore, just as I will explain in next paragraphs, defining any sort of fashion as a matter of luxury is a fundamental error and ultimately a mere marketing strategy.

I consider that drawing a theoretical line is suitable and useful to defining and qualifying the opposing elements that antagonise luxury against fashion. The two notions represent, above all, elements that are attached to different paradigms.

Briefly, fashion is defined by the paradigm of the totality of the objects whose lifetime is short or extremely short, with a low to average production cost, that are mass-produced from common materials, while luxury is defined as the totality of artefacts having an unlimited lifetime, a high production cost and a prohibitive one, that are made of good-quality materials defined by exclusivity, in limited series or as one-of-a-kind items.

On the other hand, the opposition of luxury vs fashion is complemented by how the target public of the products inherent in luxury and fashion react. In the case of fashion, the target is a mass public, quite numerous and heterogeneous, while in the case of luxury the public is limited and theoretically formed of connoisseurs of the cultural items and values that are in inherent in these artefacts who buy these items in full awareness.

To complement the differences that define the paradigmatic universe of fashion as opposed to luxury, one should also consider the position of consumers vis-a-vis the symbolic value transmitted by the used objects. In the case of fashion consumers, they wish to tell the world that they keep up with the trends, they go with the avant-garde flow, they reinvent themselves permanently and they try to integrate socially by using fashionable clothing and accessories, while - in symbolic terms - consumers of luxury items wish to announce the exact opposite of that, more specifically their aim is not necessary the one to keep up with the latest fashion and do not want to get integrated within a certain category of consumers, but to stand out in the large mass of consumers by buying and using some specific luxury items. At the end of the day, not consuming fashionable items may be one of the traits defining the position of the new elites, since it is well-known that elites are the last ones to adopt developments proposed by the world of fashion. Elites are living close to the border of the classical and the traditional and at the periphery of the world of fashion.

Other significant differences that distinctly define the paradigm of fashionable items against the luxury ones refer to how much products last and how they are used, since one trait of luxury items is that these items that are of a strong symbolic value may be bequeathed, as a time bond connecting generations, a fact that also conveys the idea of how durable that product is, while making us think - why not - of the aristocratic dynasties. For example, this particular aspect of the world of luxury is speculated primarily by the campaigns that promote hand-made limited-edition wristwatches.

Another peculiarity of the products that may be introduced in the paradigm of luxury products is the one according to which the materials they are made of (leather, metal, wood, etc.) become nobler as they get older, while imperfections never suggest lower quality.

Generally speaking, luxury involves natural top-notch materials and fibers (diamonds, gold, leather, silk, natural essences etc.), while fashion mostly uses natural average-quality materials and synthetic materials. This sort of example may also be expanded to cover deluxe perfumes that make use of natural essences and traditional

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production techniques; moreover, there are high-end perfumers that produce unique and bespoke perfumes, following the clients' instructions, or limited series thereof.

Consequently, considering this other element of the paradigms of luxury and fashion, we can of course deduce that production costs are significantly different and distinct from one system to the other.

Referring to defining the peculiarities of time in the case of deluxe products, visual artist and designer Fabrizio Plessi told the online version of *Art Style*:

> To me, the difference between fashion and luxury is very clear. Fashion is trendy, is quick and dynamic; while luxury is something slower, it is in our DNA, it insinuates itself in our psychology and it changes us, making us different. [...] Today's luxury is actually time, you need time. (www.art-style.it, 2012, my translation)

Values that define luxury in style-related terms border on the classical realm of culture, since luxury is characterised by simplicity, style and elegance, in other words, a certain amount of austerity. In opposition to that, fashion is begotten by an avant-garde *melange* of forms and materials, by the very existence of the *bricolage*, the attempted cultural mixes, the redefinitions and, why not, by the very footprint that certain kitschy elements leave. To support that idea, let me bring in the following statement: "[...] I have reached the conclusion that elegance and luxury are two distinct elements that become indispensable to each other when we want to talk about the "true elegance" and the "true luxury". (Amatulli, 2005: 104, my translation)

To continue the review of the elements that I'm calling "antagonistic" and that go against each other under the paradigms that define luxury and fashion, I need to remind that luxury items are exclusively produced in countries and geographical areas with a strong manufacturing tradition (for example, luxury watches are exclusively produced in Switzerland, whereas mohair, a natural fiber of a top quality, in countries such as Turkey etc.), since luxury industries are not influenced by globalisation, while the only purpose of the fashion industry is to generate profit, therefore it is highly influenced by globalisation, most of the products that are marketed being made in Asian countries, in China for the most part.

Referring to this phenomenon, more specifically the effect of the globalised production upon the fashion industry, we should observe that the specialty literature has noted a differentiated trend of the globalisation of the male and female clothing production, but also a generalised polarisation trend of the production of casual and sports items with an average and low price in China, while producers become ever less specialised. (Bovone, Ruggerone, 2006: 75).

In opposition to that, luxury brands keep their production facilities in the home countries only (for example, in Spain, in the case of the Spanish-owned *Loewe* leather industry giant). Contrariwise, values such as tradition, quality and uniqueness, which are the traits that encourage the target public to buy these items, would fully disappear while a globalising approach would eventually lead to the disappearance of the traits that make those products specific and to the brand's loss of prestige.

The Italian publication *Dizionario della Moda*, coordinated by Guido Vergani, explains above Loewe that it was opened in 1846 in Madrid by Heinrich Loewe Rossberg, a

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leather craftsman of German origin, and that the company is managed nowadays by the fourth generation of the Loewe family. (Vergani, 2010: 701)

The contemporary reality has given us an opportunity to notice the outcome of the authentic DNA of luxury products skidding away and also the outcome of their crossbreeding with commercial items, and I refer, for instance, to powering Jaguars with Ford engines or Lamborghinis with VW engines. The market shares of both Jaguar and Lamborghini were affected by this sort of mutation, considering the negative reaction of prospective buyers.

The importance of luxury and traditional crafting and of - why not - the production of goods that can be included in the paradigm of luxury, which is to be found in national geographical areas that have not been affected by globalisation, may be so significant so as to define a nation in cultural terms, turning into a country brand. For that matter, Wally Olins said that:

> [...] some brands, after going through an osmosis process, can start representing the countries they come from. Louis Vuitton, Moët & Chandon and Hennessy [...] are without a doubt products that are associated to, and derive their stamina from, the idea of the French chique and luxury. (Olins, 2010: 20, my translation)

Therefore, we would not be wrong in saying that fashion can be defined as polycentric nowadays, since it can be designed or generated in any part of the world, while luxury appears in one single geographical area as it is influenced by tradition; for example, the upscale mechanical watch-making industry could never be relocated outside the borders of Switzerland. For that reasoning, Cesare Amatulli said that "Luxury is not only something associated to finance, but it is also about tradition and craftsmanship." (Amatulli, 2005: 105, my translation)

Another peculiarity that individualises the paradigm of luxury items is the one that refers to the absence of significant changes in the case of recipes or production processes that are used to generate these goods, a peculiarity that influences the general appearance and the uniform design of product models along the time (for example, the materials and design of the Louis Vuitton bags).

We need to note here that luxury and fashion paradigms may still be differentiated by following the sense of the utilitarian values of the products under discussion. Luxury products could be defined by their lack of utility, accompanied by an amplified aesthetic role (for example, the Movado Museum watches, which were designed by US artist Nathan George Horwitt in 1947). As Image No. 1 suggests, the Movado watches gave up on timing minutes and seconds and became utilitarian artefacts that let us measure the time using a piece of jewellery (www.movado.com, 2016).



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Image No. 1 (source: www.movado.com, 2016)

A telling example of how these two concepts, luxury and fashion, stand out paradigmatically one against the other is the one of the exclusivist Swiss-based watchmaker Romain Jerome that makes and sells the watch collection known as *Romain Jerome Titanic-DNA*; authentic chips of oxidised and stabilised steel taken from the shipwreck of the Titanic that lies 3,840 m deep under the sea are embedded in these watches. Watches are produced in a limited series (2,012 pieces) and are made of a combination of 18k gold and material taken from the shipwrecked Titanic; they are all serial-numbered and their price is of about $24,000 (www.romainjerome.ch, 2016).

We may note in this example how carefully-wrought details are, the unusual choice of materials, including the symbolic timing of the ship launch (2012), which was exactly 100 years since the time when the famous Titanic was launched to water. This Swiss watchmaker also guarantees to all buyers that they are one of the 2,012 people in the world who own such an exclusivist artefact. Consequently, it is obvious that - in the case of this item and of other similar items - we cannot speak about fashionable goods, but only about their getting integrated in the logic of luxury.

At the end of the day, the consumption of luxury goods is nothing else but a psychological projection of every individual that wishes to be perceived as second to no other. The well-known psychologist John Carl Flügel actually said that:

> […] the decorative side of clothing has always been connected to wealth. The haves afford more elaborate clothing, made of tissues that are nobler than the ones used by the non-haves. In societies where wealth is a means of gaining power and respect, the haves will naturally try to stand out in this particular manner. (Flügel, 2012: 44, my translation)

As far as I am concerned, if we accept as true the assumption that fashion is about emulation while individuals are trying to use clothing *inter alia* to integrate themselves within certain social groups, then it becomes conspicuous that the deeply-uniforming fashion is unable to generate hierarchies, yet luxury may be able to use its individualising peculiarities in order to build hierarchies.

Nowadays, fashion is influenced by structural changes that not even the fashion industry itself is able to anticipate. For example, the seasonal rhythmicity of the collections no longer matches the timing of the two annual spring/summer and autumn/winter collection; the fashion industry nowadays uses intermediate collections such as the *fast fashion* which does nothing but reduce the consumption time of the items and, why not, they even reduce a style's possible lifetime and propagation. After all, we may bring up the idea of the disappearance of fashion in the absence of the possibility to propagate fashion socially, while replacing this phenomenon with a sort of "turbo" consumption, as Gilles Lipovetsky describes it in his *Bonheur paradoxale*. Given this context of the mutations and transformations that affect the world of fashion, any attempt to make this industry more profitable, *inter alia* by its rapprochement to luxury and by borrowing some luxury peculiarities, may be construed as something that comes in as natural for those brands that are after a larger chunk in the market pie.

According to author Dana Thomas, the *luxury goods industry* in 2007 generated a turnover of around $160 bn., while 35 brands (*Louis Vuitton, Gucci, Prada, Hermes, Chanel, etc.*) controlled over 60% of the relevant market. (Thomas, 2008: 11)

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While understanding Dana Thomas's statement, yet following the paradigmatic differences exemplified above, it is obvious that - even in the case of famous brands such as Gucci or Christian Dior that surely manufacture high-quality products, delivered as serial and seasonal collections, their products are still not to be described as luxury items, but as fashionable ones.

To give you a tangible example of why products of famous fashion designers are not tokens of luxury and are not aiming at becoming luxury items, let us imagine how it would be to wear for years on end the same clothes that these fashion designers launched in 2016. We would certainly be considered out-fashioned in 2020, while everybody seeing us would fail to note the luxuriousness of our clothes.

Placing famous fashion designers in the vicinity of the immutable values of luxury may be considered an ennobling trend and a way of making own products stand out on an extremely competitive market.

I will conclude here by highlighting one last distinctive element brought about by the major differences of fashion and luxury that stem out of the very logic of each separate system: well, fashion does have its tinge of utility (it helps us dress correctly to match our professional or social dress code), while luxury, through its lack of daily utility, suggests what Veblen noted in his *Theory of the Leisure Class* too, *i.e.* expensive clothes are a "token of non-work". (Veblen, 2009: 151)

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