CHANGING FASHION

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Abstract: *The essay intends to identify and to deepen the study of progressive elements and mutations existent in the logic of contemporary fashion, as well as changes in discourse or path occurring within the fashion phenomenon in the last decades. Taking into account the fact that the fashion domain represents a challenging theme for analysis from the socio-semiotic perspective, as well as from the historic or anthropologic perspective, I believe the object of discussion is topical and obviously of great interest in the academic environment. This essay draws upon the investigations and research conducted on a centre-stage yet general topic, more specifically the realm of fashion and particularly the analysis of gender mutations that are to be seen in contemporary fashion, the research being concluded through the publishing of the volume "Fashion Semiotics – Gender transformation in contemporary fashion" with the University of Bucharest.*

Keywords: *fashion studies, fashion anthropology, gender identity.*

Before anything else, we need to make it clear that this essay draws upon the investigations and research I have conducted lately on a centre-stage yet general topic, more specifically the realm of fashion and particularly the analysis of gender mutations that are to be seen in contemporary fashion.

This paper is actually a possible future topic of research and analysis of the fashion phenomenon, as well as food for thought over the mutations and transformations that fashion induces at the social and cultural levels (more specifically the social uniformisation) or that - why not - the very society may generate in its turn by expressing needs and fostering consumption.

The current dynamics of fashion

Nowadays, fashion is a bivalent phenomenon, both materially and culturally. People use fashion to outline or define their own identity. In conceptual terms, even if we understand that clothing comes with a certain added value that fashion adds to it (***n.b.*** a material value), we do need to understand that certain values that are attached to clothing only exist in the imagination and inner beliefs of people (***n.b.*** cultural value). (Kawamura, 2006: 11)

Fundamentally, fashion is a phenomenon that draws its energy from renewal and the perpetual movement of shapes, trends, colours, symbolism and – why not – the message that it sends across. In the absence of these elements, more specifically renewal and the movement of factors that define the whole process, as far as I am concerned we are unable to discuss about a fashion phenomenon. Starting from the mid-19th century (which was the historical moment when fashion as we know it today was born), fashion has brought fresh cuts and fresh forms in the foreground, plus some innovating colouring, avant-garde technologies and materials, and the assertion of the individual identities of people.

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In the spirit of what was asserted above, the way in which Roland Barthes defines fashion seems to be of relevance to me. This is what he said: "Fashion postulates an uchrony, a time that does not exist; in the particular case of fashion, the past is dishonouring and the present is permanently "consumed" by the foreshadowing fashion." (Barthes apud Baldini, 2005: 33, translation by the author)

The assumption that I am bringing up here refers to the fact that the way in which the universe of fashion currently evolves is deviating from its very internal and natural logic. After a very long while of immobility and lack of innovation in terms of clothing (see the Ancient days and Middle Ages, which are historical landmarks speaking of which specialists never mention fashion, but just dressing, which is exactly why certain types of clothes (*e.g.* the *toga*) survived the centuries), we are today at a time where fashion is defined by a standstill and proposes buyers to recycle some of the old clothing items that used to be fresh and unheard of a long time ago. In order to uphold and illustrate this idea, I will also line up in this essay a set of products that have become classics and that current fashion keeps recycling.

Talking about fashion not being what is used to be anymore because the clothing industry has been deprived of innovation over some extended historical periods, writer Gilles Lipovetsky noted that:

> Primitive society is hyperconservative: it excludes the emergence of fashion because fashion goes hand in hand with a relative devaluing of the past. Fashion always implies the attribution of prestige and superiority to new models and by the same token entails a certain downgrading of the old order. Completely centered on respect for the past and the meticulous reproduction of that past, primitive society cannot permit the consecration of novelty and individual fancy, the aesthetic autonomy of fashion. In a relation of strict dependence vis-à-vis its mythic past, primitive society is organized in such a way as to limit and reject the dynamics of change and history. (Lipovetsky, 2002: 18)

Nowadays, as far as I am concerned, contemporary fashion is frozen in an alarming immobility (that becomes conspicuous if you look into fashion at granular level) which forces us to wonder whether fashion is still something up-to-date judging by the mechanisms that validated it back in the past or whether the history of clothing has not entered into a new era, the post-fashioning era, which is governed by another set of rules and is being managed by other internal vectors.

So I wonder: aren't we today witnessing unknowingly the dawn of a new era dominated by a new form of history of the costume, which is actually camouflaged under the appearance of contemporary fashion?

List of uniformisation items

I will shortly review some of the items that have become classics of fashion, according to a personal theory (their lifecycle and the time when they appeared and started to suggest the outset of this suggestion), which – by virtue of their very existence and daily usage – do nothing but validate the afore-mentioned assumption according to which we are at a time when fashion stands still and people are socially uniformed ("levelled off") in terms of clothing.

We need to clarify here that the descriptions of the products and the chronological periods when they appeared in the foreground of fashion are lined up based on the clues indicated by the prestigious *Dizionario della Moda* coordinated by Guido Vergani and published in 2010:

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- *The polo shirt* was launched in 1927;
- The *Blue jeans* were first used as fashion items in the 1940s, in USA;
- The *Converse All-Star* sports shoes were designed around 1918;
- *Perfecto* bikers' jacket appeared in the 1950s;
- *Vans* sports shoes were designed and first marketed in 1966 in California;
- The prototype of the *Ray-Ban Aviator* sun glasses was first launched in 1937 and was first used as a fashion accessory in 1950, while *Wayfarer* became a craze in the early 1960s;
- *Superga 2750* sports shoes were designed and launched in Italy in 1925;
- Moccasin-type *"Car shoe"* for drivers, launched in 1963;
- The actual *Moccasin*, which became a fashion accessory amongst US students back in the 1920s;
- *Stilettos*, high-heel classic-shape shoes, designed by Andre Perugia, became fashionable in 1940 – 1950;
- The *Cardigan*, a knitted button-tied garment, became fashionable in 1970;
- The *flats*, flat-sole shoes launched in the movie productions of the 1950s;
- The *cotton hoodies*, appeared in the 1930s in US;
- The *trench coat* (taken from the military) in the mid-1940s;
- The *slip-ons* became cool in the late 1940s;
- The *(Hunter) rubber boots* – patented in 1955, they originally came in green.
- The *shorts*, short-sleeved trousers, that appeared back in the 1930s and saw their most glorious years in the 1960s – 1970s;
- The *training suit*, invented in 1919
- The *Sperry Top-Sider Boat Shoes*, appeared in 1935 and became quite a fashionable item in the 1960s, they were produced *inter alia* by Timberland and Lumberjack.

*(*Vergani, 2010: pp. 210 – 1209*)*

This was just a short review of some of the most iconic accessories, which are no longer indications of an up-to-date *fashionista*, but rather parts of the same uniform that our contemporaries wear in their everyday life, and the list can go on and on.

Mutations and transformations

In order to understand more easily and more clearly the implications that such uniformisation of the clothing habits can generate socially, I consider it necessary to bring up an essential theoretical idea that writer Massimo Baldini highlighted a while ago.

While bringing forth Gabriel Tarde's theories of imitation, Massimo Baldini explains how a costume will prevail in the closed societies, while open societies foster the development of fashion. Closed societies stifle the development of fashion because they are more conservative, more traditional and deprived of dynamism, while open societies are willing to embrace innovation and change, and broker an ongoing give-and-take attitude that encourages fashion. (Baldini, 2005: 28)

By randomly lining up all of those clothing items (and the list is still open), one will note that once fashionable accessories (that used to be new or fresh back in the day)

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have turned into classic clothing, since they have been used without interruption for 50 to 100 years without any essential change in terms of style or concept.

Since we understand these new transformations that contemporary fashion has put forth and considering as pertinent those theories according to which fashion and the evolution of clothing (*e.g.* Gilles Lipovetsky's theory described in his volume *The Empire of Fashion* and other works too*)* have even democratised society by breaking down the identity divide that separated social classes by means of the aristocratic dress code, it is only too normal to wonder whether this new moment of inertia that is to be found in the realm of the current fashion and clothing could generate a new social gap, a new hierarchy and – why not – a new social dynamics.

The transformations and transgressions of the natural logic of fashion which I can sense and bring up are described below.

First of all, the repetitive promotion of certain clothing items that have become classic, since they have not been renewed over the past dozens of years (and they are therefore in an antithesis to the logic and the internal mechanisms that define fashion), will bring home the normal question whether we can continue talking about fashion these days or whether we should rather envisage a new levelling type of uniform dress, and hence about a new era of costume.

Secondly, as far as I am concerned, back in the day, when everything started, fashion consumers would rather go for a product that exhibited a number of outstanding and original aesthetic or chromatic features, because it was something new that helped them better assert their identity (even if their appearance was sometimes shocking). Nowadays, the fact that people tend to prefer products sold by well-known retailers over really original items that make them stand out is quite conspicuous.

Given the dog-eat-dog competition amongst retailers and the existence of global markets, competing networks showcase their similar clothing supply nowadays more than ever in order to maximise sales and minimise risks. But this phenomenon may induce a trend of uniformisation of the clothing habits of the mass consumers, a reality that does nothing but confirm the assumption of a standstill, of a mutation that fashion is exposed to nowadays. We can even affirm that the logo on the tag is more important than the product or the quality of the product. Consumers buy the products proposed by popular retainers (*e.g.* Zara, H&M, Mango), that sell well globally, a circumstance that should be considered for purposes whenever analysing the uniformisation phenomenon.

The globalization and uniformisation of the way in which fashion is distributed acquire negative connotations, and for that matter Giorgio Riello noted: "For Poiret, Worth, Chanel, the idea of selling their creations to a heterogeneous clientele within enormous shopping spaces would have been represented truly a desecration." (Riello, 2012: 153, translation by the author)

Another influencer of the fashion uniformisation trend is the price-quality ratio provided by retailers such as the ones mentioned above, and in this context we may note that it is just a limited number of consumers who are really interested in buying generic brand products, which are produced by local manufacturers or artists in limited editions.

In order to continue stocktaking the potential drivers of the situation which is presented in this essay, we also need to consider the uniformisation factor inherent in the extended circulation of fake products right inside the universe of contemporary fashion.

We need to clarify that imitation might be one of the drivers that have actually frozen the aesthetic forms that define contemporary fashion, since the production of

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copies propagate a sort of fashion echo that will still be heard and seen even after the originals become outdated. Original products that sell well attract massive waves of imitations that may actually generate the impression that certain fashionable products continue to be trendy for more time than they actually are, suggesting that certain fashion accessories (*e.g.* Ray Ban Aviator and Wayfarer glasses) are used permanently.

In order to outline and understand the level of the imitation and copy phenomenon as accurately as possible, I will quote Ms. Dana Thomas who recounts something that happened to her while she was in Shanghai in 2004, in the lobby of a famous hotel, where forged luxury items (Gucci, Versace, etc) produced from good-quality materials and almost perfectly finished were on sale for quite affordable prices. (Thomas, 2008: pp. 10 – 11)

That sort of anecdote confirms the advanced status and rate of penetration of counterfeit products that are almost impossible to tell from the original products.

Possible effects of clothes becoming too "classic"

Moreover, since the above mentioned characteristics ensure commercial success, the products to which we refer and that have become classic are produced in editions by different brands and become genuine international best-sellers.

For example, the polo T-shirt is sold even nowadays (without any major developments in terms of design and tissues) by both the very first manufacturer who originally launched it, *i.e.* Lacoste, but also by Ralph Lauren, Tommy Hilfiger, Diesel, Armani or Burberry, and the list may continue.

I have realised that the analysis of this very specific example (the polo T-shirt) is applicable without exception to any other clothing item that is specified in the above-mentioned list, while generating the same type of social mutations and transformation, changes in one's identity discourse, gender discourse or age discourse.

This analysis of the example that refers to the polo T-shirt brings up a number of relevant issues, which provide social and semiotic details. Originally, this was a utility product, it was used as a sports outfit (Jean René Lacoste was a tennis player). The polo T-shirt has survived the decades, unchanged to this day, and has come to be a *unisex* and *uniage* clothing item, that both women and men wear, regardless of their age. The polo T-shirt, which is considered to be *casualwear* these days, is manufactured by various designers, just as I mentioned before. Speaking about that, I need to highlight that the target public (in terms of its psycho-social structure), but also the values and philosophy that these brands that are so different from each other would like to send across are fundamentally different (Diesel vs. Burberry). In spite of all that, the polo T-shirt is used in a relatively uniform manner by the fans of these designers, a conclusion which drives home the idea that uniformity also touches upon people's own identities.

Another important detail to mention in the case of the daily usage of the polo T-shirt is that – in the case of developed countries, where the industry and consumption of fashion are well evolved, even if brands and purchasing costs differ – it is not used exclusively in the urban environment, but it is also to be found in the wardrobes of provincial users too.

Considering the uniformity issues that I have identified and presented in the case of the polo T-shirt, I am actually wondering whether the statement of Fred Davis, a sociologist, which was valid and applicable in 1992, when he published his *Fashion, Culture and Identity*, is still valid nowadays:

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> That the clothes we wear make a statement is itself a statement that in this age of heightened self-consciousness has virtually become a cliché. But what is the nature of the statements we make with our clothes, cosmetics, perfumes, and coiffures, not to mention the other material artifacts with which we surround ourselves? (Davis, 1992: 3)

Starting from what Fred Davis said, we should notice a particular situation and we should wonder what sort of messages/statements a rebellious young man wearing a Diesel Jeans (130 $) polo T-shirt can send and what would be the message of a mature man wearing the same sort of T-shirt manufactured by, say, Burberry, whose price tag is nearly triple in size (290$), while both are made of the same *piqué* cotton tissue.

We should also consider that the two manufacturers send identity and social standing messages that appear to be different (Diesel targets the relatively young consumers, and sends a message of freedom and originality, while Burberry targets a more mature and conservative public, suggesting tradition and a British-like poise).

So I wonder whether the fact people having different ages and different social positions share the same values by using a piece of clothing which is so much similar, is not a sort of stereotypical and uniforming discourse? Continuing this logical stream, in addition to all that, we reach the only too natural conclusion according to which it is not the object *per se* and its aesthetical features that will sell the merchandise today, but the way in which archetypal values are being perceived, the underlying philosophies that drive the brands and that brands symbolically send across to consumers.

Besides, we are also finding ourselves in front of a paradoxical situation where the very material a pair of jeans-like trousers is made of and its very cut are almost identical in the case of items that different brands promote. Moreover, for example, due to the trends imposed by the fashion which is preferred during a certain season, the prevailing hue for these trousers is indigo, with some discoloured areas. The way in which certain brands (e.g. Scotch & Soda) have found their place on the market and have managed to announce the uniqueness of their characteristics on such a uniformed market is to print on the tags the information that worn-off/random discolouration areas are done manually and without any industrial tool, which is exactly the sort of nearly imperceptible detail that makes the product stand out against all others.

On the other hand, this sort of example and the mechanism which I described above can be extrapolated to other products on the list presented at the beginning of this essay and to many other products as well.

This is how we arrive to a major conclusion, more specifically that the values of fashion migrate from the actual object and its inherent values to the producer of that clothing item and to the iconic values that are created and sent through the philosophy and marketing policy that are used to promote any brand.

As a consequence, we need to consider yet another potential factor of the current uniformity trend, more specifically the social pressure, the urge to get integrated in a certain social group by means of certain clothing items which the collective conscience endow with magical attributes.

For that matter, we should bring up the position that French semiotician Roland Barthes, a representative of the French structuralism, had about the psychological prospect of using clothing. This is what he said: “In this particular case, the benchmark is no longer represented by style or the spirit of an era, but by the psychology of the individual that wears the clothes: the personal choice of clothes is supposed to reveal the psychological depth of an individual.” (Barthes, 2006: 31, translation by the author)

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The words of Roland Barthes may only reinforce our belief that fashion should fundamentally represent – at psychological level – a personal choice which is customised to fit a certain culture, education level and social status of every individual. Nowadays, it is exactly this diversifying feature (*i.e.* the individualising psychological decision) that started to wane away *inter alia* under the pressure of the *dress-code* imposed by the professional environment or under the social pressure that one's entourage can put up (in the case of youngsters). Under such circumstance, the individualising psychological feature, the one which should have determined to a certain extent the diverse choice of clothes, slides into the background nowadays, while a number of uniforming psychological trends are becoming obvious.

Conclusions

As a consequence, assuming that the presentation of the elements that I have covered so far is accurate, it becomes obvious that fashion is being crippled by a creative paralysis. There is a huge amount of clothing products that were designed decades ago and that are still around, which fundamentally contradicts the main characteristic of fashion, *i.e.* the ongoing renewal, while breaking away from the past and promoting novelties.

On the other hand, at a fundamental level, but also visually and aesthetically, fashion should bring fresh avant-garde elements in the foreground, while what it actually does is just recycling classic items (*e.g.* the polo T-shirt, the Converse sports shoes, the Ray Ban Aviator sun glasses, etc). Under such circumstances, fashion is no longer designed by putting together colours, novelties, impactful and shocking visual elements, unparalleled creativity and style of the fashion designers, while showcasing the quality and value of the embedded materials and accessories, but by tapping on the symbolic value that buyers attach out of their own will or that were educated to attach to a certain clothing item. Today's fashion preserves and recycles clothing items whose shapes and materials have remained unchanged, that are uniform and that are just being reinterpreted (maybe just chromatically) and included as symbolic elements that support the construction of the visual and identity discourse.

We can say that fashion, strictly as an aesthetic phenomenon and as an unrestricted and ideology-free form of self-expression, is on the brink of extinction. For that matter, writer Tim Edwards believes that fashion used to be an apolitical phenomenon for a quite a long while, while today fashion has become an ideological tool which is employed by race-based social movements, civil rights movements, women activists or gay pride movements or even by the urban guerrillas that young people are putting forth to fight back against some prevailing models which society imposed upon them. (Edwards, 2012: 153-154)

I truly believe that the next evolutions of the fashion phenomenon will come up with other sorts of transgressions and mutations deviating from the natural and fundamental logic of fashion, because fashion is a live phenomenon that is closely interconnected with society, while the contemporary society is at a time where values and traditional beliefs are getting reorganised, a trend that will surely influence the way in which fashion will continue to evolve.

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