

Fashion and DIY: Pauperism

Bruno Remaury

DIY appearance is today, as it has already been in the past, a combined use of different exterior signs of garment-related poverty –a poverty effect that of course is striking in a society where clothes are seen as the first outward sign of wealth.

This clothing DIY that plays with juxtaposing poor and rich clothes, old and new clothes –like in the famous marketing cliché of the Chanel/Tati mix–, is nothing new, we saw it all before to a great extent in the late sixties/early seventies. It has always been with us, this fashion for the used and cheap, the recycled and throwaway, the cheap and chic to paraphrase one of the brands who plays with the concept, and is on the increase with the upsurge in DIY and customisation. This is a phenomenon that goes beyond the simple fashion game and is interesting to examine in all of its dimensions: an interest in low price shops (from Tati to H&M) and for second hand clothes, a taste for the used and the old, the aesthetic of the worn and the patched, an (apparent) disaffection for the more obvious brands and a search for more “out of the way” brands, a trend for so-called bad taste and letting oneself go. All of these expressions, largely represented today in this trend for the personalisation of the appearance come together on one point: they all represent a counter-trend to ostentation through the appearance of poverty.

This type of DIY is a recurring phenomenon in the history of clothing and has always existed: from the begging orders of the 13th century to the Jansenists, from the clothing

ethics of Protestant bourgeoisie to that of the beatniks. Historically, this is a movement that occurs in reaction to a dominant social model, the dress codes of Saint Dominique or that of Melanchton for example, as objections to the excess of their time. Closer to home, and to bring it back to fashion, the neo-pauperism of Coco Chanel when she started was in contradiction with the ornamental paroxysm of the “Belle Epoque” and the tickling craziness of Paul Poiret, while the pauperism claimed by the hippies was a refusal of this golden age of fashion that represented the sixties and the explosion of ready to wear.

So this “pauperist” DIY is an implicit answer to a dominant current of ostentation. It is a reactive movement, that consists finally of an anti-fashion or a non-fashion as a reaction against the ostentatious fashion system. However, in as much as this system has two dimensions, that of fashion and that of luxury, this reaction takes two forms: the refusal of luxury manifests itself in the refusal of the exterior signs of wealth; that of fashion by the refusal of clichés –from the cult object to the generic clothes of the moment. But these two reactive attitudes can not be compared, and the conclusion is evident: one can produce non-luxury products, one can not produce non-fashion. To refuse expensiveness (or its apparent signs) is simple and obvious, as can be seen in a number of North American movements such as downshifting. However, refusing fashion implies always providing an alternative, an anti-fashion, which is, in the end, another type of fashion. This is the whole paradox of garment DIY, it is supposed to produce individualisation and anti-fashion: it can not, at a certain level of self-expression, avoid producing another fashion.

What are the springs behind this DIY? In as much as it means getting off the beaten track, without becoming a designer or producer oneself, then the existing circuits must be twisted so as to extract clothes that will satisfy this issue: different or, at least, adaptable –whether it be in terms of assem-

bly or the way they are worn. A technique that is also an ethic as it means, each time, if not adopting “real” pauperism, then at least satisfying the first rule: economy. The first qualities of the DIY appearance are often, at the same time as the refusal of the ostentatious and obvious canons of fashion, contesting its economic issues. To produce a non-fashion, means first of all, to produce a pecuniary dis-investment (that far from excludes an emotional over-investment). From this double constraint –getting off the fashion beaten track, not making any material investment but letting, on the contrary, “talent” and personality express themselves, come two aesthetics that vary, according to fashion history, and that we find to be more or less neck and neck today: the old, rich garment and the new, poor garment.

Second hand clothes and cheap clothes, these two sources of garment DIY are never telescoped, superimposed or mixed to the point that fashion loses itself bringing together diverse expressions under generic images and terms, a sort of hotchpotch of ideas that designates reality rather than describing it: from grunge to vintage via zapping and customisation, these “movements” would, for the most part, not have existed as such except for in the heads of those who talk about them, they end up designating anything, when their separate analysis enables us to better understand these trends and, certain changes in our behaviour and attitudes in the way we dress.

The old, rich garment simultaneously reflects a few expectations: the previous life (the used garment) and the never before seen aspect (the unique garment). The previous life deploys an aesthetic of individual use, an already well-used way of getting a unique garment (the jeans I aged myself), rapidly taken up by the brands themselves (we can see, all anti-fashion proposes another fashion), from the faded jeans from Marithé et François Girbaud to the sweaters with holes from Comme des Garçons, to the aged leather at Chevignon to the pre-shined gabardine at Yohji Yamamoto. Even if each

time, the context is different, even if the approaches are individual and the fashion theories of varying complexity, the result plays –among others– on a major dimension, the person for whom the garment has a history.

The second hand garment also plays with this dimension, as it has already been worn, but has another dimension that makes it unique. Far from the mass-produced garment, the second hand garment has the added value of being a unique piece. Here we are getting closer to the idea of a collector’s garment, one of the best contemporary examples of which is the “vintage” phenomenon (old clothes that have become classics”, and identifiable as such, like old jeans that can be dated by tiny details known only to the collectors), and one of the extensions/claiming by brands is to find in the manufacturing of “new” clothes –or sort of new– in fabrics and clothes that have been passed on. In this domain, the work of Martin Margiela is exemplary, he accumulates three values within one garment: the new (as a new design), the unique (as from a craftsman), the previous life (as it comes from old materials).

The poor new garment also reflects a number of expectations and particularly interesting attitudes. First of all, at the same time as a financial under-investment, it is the expression of an intellectual over-investment from the fashion intention and the effort made to adapt a garment. To use a garment from a cheap distribution circuit is to show a level of intelligence in relation to the garment and its panoplies. It is, implicitly to refuse a “name” designer garment to put one’s own name on a garment through expertise and knowing how to choose. To adapt Tati into fashion, is to operate a process of distinction based on competence to the detriment of one’s financial means. An attitude that can also, among some, take on a political edge through a refusal of the sartorial attributes of the bourgeoisie.

But beyond this fashion pauperism, should we also be talking about the pauperism of

“out of fashion” that consists, not of claiming the signs of sartorial poverty, nor of playing with them, but simply adopting them because they are the most accessible, the most simple and the cheapest. The contrary of *under-investing to over-signify* –whether on an emotional level (the special occasion garment) or an intellectual one (the cheap garment)– there is also the fact of *under-investing to not-signify*, a negation of the values traditionally attached to garments that are the probable consequence of a double excess in the clothes market: on the one hand the hyper-valorisation of name designers; on the other, the extremely commonplace nature of fashions that are more and more seen as “throwaway”. This over-valorisation of the fashion act as an end in itself is probably at the basis of a current of disaffection for clothes, that hasn’t been studied yet, one of the forms of pauperist DIY is but one of its manifestations.

Let’s go even further and ask ourselves if this phenomenon is not extendable to all of the body appearance techniques. One of the marking facts of the second half of the 20th century will have been the progressive abandon of a certain number of social marks that were traditionally expressed through clothing, traditions having moved away to leave a relative carelessness in clothing, two good examples of which are the rise in the popularity of sportswear and the disappearance of the notion of “Sunday best”. So among younger people especially, we can see the development of another relationship to the body, precisely based on the absence of constraints: messy, unkempt, relative dirt have more and more their place in a sort of “degree zero for clothes” that remains, also, a form of customisation by lack of investment –a reduction in other words.

Of course, this attitude the minute it is qualified, becomes identifiable and useable as vocabulary in fashion. This dress attitude (or non-attitude) –all the more paradoxical as it meant to be anaesthetic– becomes *de facto* one of the aesthetic tools used by fashion, whether it is in assembly or the attitude in

which the manner (unfinished and let go, negligent in appearance) becomes a new aesthetic and a stance (research and pose), and the circle is closed: rejection is, yet again, transformed into a model. As Erasmus said in *On Civility in Children*, “a little maladjustment doesn’t harm youth”. A “maladjustment” that is made up of individual DIY, letting go, and of course a fashion attitude, and we can see that it didn’t start yesterday.

Bruno Remaury,
Professor, IFM