

Fashion, Television Series and the Wearability Equation¹

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Series make fashion

Over the past few years, television series have had a growing influence on fashion consumers: “In the last decade, the once-unchallenged role of movies in shaping public tastes has been largely usurped by television”, wrote Ruth La Ferla in the *New York Times*² back in 2010. Fashion items become best sellers just because they are seen in a popular TV series: Manolo Blahnik stiletto heels in *Sex and the City* in the nineties, Gabrielle Solis’ (Eva Longoria) Juicy Couture tracksuit and Bree Van de Camp’s (Marcia Cross) red lingerie from La Perla in *Desperate Housewives* are often quoted as examples.

TV series do not just influence consumers however, they also influence brands and the trend industry (designers, unions, press, trend bureaus, advertising...). Take the “*Mad Men effect*” which designates the extent of the influence of the series’ aesthetic on every level of fashion. In the 2008 Autumn/Winter runway Michael Kors show and the 2010 Prada and Vuitton A/W shows, we were treated to flower prints, high-waisted silhouettes, straight skirts, blouses, twin-sets, tweed and Peter Pan collars. The Vuitton campaign for that season mirrored the visual codes of *Mad Men*

to the letter. Women’s magazines celebrated the return of breasts, hips and buttocks as if it were a cultural revolution. Mattel launched a set of Don and Betty Draper Barbies. Banana Republic launched a *Mad Men* collection in tandem with AMC that made it possible for everyone to “Add some vintage elegance to your professional dress with classic designs” at a reasonable price. And finally Estée Lauder brought out a collection of limited edition *Mad Men* products (blusher, lipstick, nail polish) in 2012 and 2013, sold in retro packaging with Constance Jablonski channelling Betty Draper as the cosmetic line’s muse.

The shows’ costume designers have been elevated to the position of style guru and act as consultants for brands and their own clientele. Thanks to the success of *Gossip Girl*, the stylist Eric Daman collaborated with DKNY on a line of tights, designed jewellery for Swarovski, and was hired by the American franchise Charlotte Russe as Artistic Director. In 2010, he also published a fashion self-help bible entitled *You know you want it: style, inspiration, confidence* filled with tips for how to dress (unfortunately as yet untranslated in French), the doctrine of which is that style depends above all on self-confidence: “The key to style is confidence. And the secret to being confident is being prepared”. Patricia Field (*Sex and the City*), Eric Daman (*Gossip Girl*), Janie Bryant (*Mad Men*, *Deadwood*) and others are now today’s recognised style arbiters: their expertise in terms of styling goes way beyond the sets of their television shows.

Film and TV

How can we explain the level of influence TV series have on fashion? We could say it’s like the cinema, after all, films can also be at the origin of fashion trends. At the moment for example, Baz Luhrmann’s *The Great Gatsby*, with costumes designed by Prada and Brooks Brothers is creating the same level of media

frenzy as *Mad Men*. Films and series work as image catalogues that fashion, the art of borrowing and recycling *par excellence*, appropriates and recycles. The reason for fashion's dependence on fiction, both filmic and televised, comes from the importance of narrative in the way desire is constructed. In order to inspire desire, a non-functional object like a piece of clothing must "tell a story", thus constituting a base for fantasy projection. Fiction has precisely the power to shift objects into our imaginary world "in harmony with our desires"³. The item of clothing worn by the fictional character can thus become a "trait" that the viewer, who has made this character an "ideal self" (someone they aspire to be), adopts through a partial identification process. This is why some fans, particularly teenagers, dress like their favourite TV characters.

This schema (from Freudian psychoanalysis) enables us to understand in general terms, the nature of the influence the filmed image has on consumer behaviour, and notably on fashion consumption. But the difference between TV images and cinema are too great for us to think they influence their viewers in the same way. Cinema is, as David Foster Wallace posits, an "authoritarian medium"⁴: through the way it is set up, cinema substitutes the viewer's immediate environment with a fantastic world that it imposes on the viewer until the end of the screening. *The Searchers* begins with a black screen. Dorothy Jordan opens a door and the landscape of Monument Valley takes over the screen. Ford thus puts the hallucinatory essence of the filmic process *en abyme* with the triptych of the darkened cinema, the unique light source (the projector) and the immensity of the image onscreen. The reality effect, meaning the impression the viewers have of actually "being there" is dependent on these artefacts. But, when the cinema image is not broadcast in these conditions, it loses some of its power to charm: "In the dark of the cinema lies the very fascination

for film. Evoke the opposite experience: on TV where you can also watch movies there is zero fascination: the darkness is gone, the anonymity covered up; the space is familiar, articulated (by furniture, objects we know), organised"⁵. The televised image is part of the viewer's usual universe, it does not replace it with anything like the cinema image. Far from interrupting one's everyday life, the series prolongs and enriches it. Through its form first of all: the long-term but cut-up temporality of the TV series turns viewing into a ritual. Also, because all series without exception are themselves the representation of someone's daily life. What is the underlying narrative of a series made of? Like the cinema (in a Hollywood frame of reference), it is a fable: a collection of facts presented from the angle of "seemingly true or necessary"⁶, that is to say, tied together according to causal laws that organise their continuation. But not only this, as on the edge of the narrative arcs that constitute the action of the series, the serial narrative takes time over the most ordinary facts and gestures that the film made for the cinema can only suggest due to its tight window. This is how a series manages to create the "real effect"⁷, which also captures the fact that the characters are simply there, they exist, delivered from the artificial dramaturgy of the fable. In order to convince ourselves, let's compare the film *The Hobbit* directed by Peter Jackson and the series *Game of Thrones* (two recent examples of the success of the fantasy genre): in *Game of Thrones*, there is a lot of walking around, eating, trying on new outfits, talking, training, waiting, lighting fires, confiding feelings, memories, regrets, dreams, having sex, taking baths. But there are very few battles, summit meetings, coronations or weddings. *The Hobbit* is a succession of scenes of bravura, *Game Of Thrones* has very few: while the film retraces the big events of a certain period in the history of Middle Earth after Smaug has hunted the Dwarves off Erebor, the series, dedicated to

the rivalry for the control of Westeros shows the underside of history, and shows us what we will never know of Gandalf, Bilbo or Thorin, meaning the intimacy and daily lives of the heroes⁸. *Game of Thrones*, compared to *The Hobbit*, is reality TV!

TV series thus create a feeling of proximity with the viewer through scenes that are seemingly useless in dramatic terms but decisive in terms of the assimilation of “everydayness” by the viewer and the transformation of the viewing experience into an addiction. Following a series means we soon start to miss the presence we had gotten used to, and that we want to make it come back, over and over. This characteristic of the serial format becoming a routine predisposes it naturally to “softly” pushing beliefs and representations, in short, influencing the viewing public⁹.

The wearability of clothes

Now let us observe how these generic differences between cinema and television are expressed in terms of costumes. In the cinema, the most spectacular accoutrements can seem absolutely normal: Tyler Durden (as played by Brad Pitt in *Fight Club*) wears a shirt with a long pointed collar covered in toucans and a red leather jacket, the driver in *Drive* (Ryan Gosling) loses none of his virility despite the satin, champagne-coloured baseball jacket he wears, and Sailor (Nicolas Cage) in *Wild at Heart* in no way embarrasses Lula (Laura Dern) when he exclaims that his snakeskin jacket is “the symbol of my individuality and my belief in personal freedom”. Obviously, if someone were to dress like that in real life they would look like they were going to a fancy dress. Dressing like a film character one loves presents the same risk as wearing an outfit exactly as it was worn on the runway: one is not dressed but wearing a costume. In film, as in a runway show, the looks going up and down are “made of the vain substance that

makes up dreams” (those of the designer and of the public). With no camera or projector, exposed to the harsh light of day, stage costumes squash the wearer and turn out to be *unwearable*. If TV series have acquired the power of influence we mentioned earlier, it is precisely because they show fashion items worn by their characters that are *wearable*. This wearability factor is less often mentioned when describing the psychology of the fashion consumer, than the distinctive, original and newness factors. However, it would be unwise to underestimate it: while the latter can trigger the purchase of a fashion item, the lack of the former can prevent it. Wearability is the regulator of the desire for distinction: the consumer is quite prepared to stand out, but not to the extent that it makes them a laughing stock. In addition, that which is chic is never eccentric: on the contrary, it is the singular interpretation of conformism. People who are said to be elegant usually dress in quite a traditional manner, obeying the norms of their group, only taking liberties in terms of localised shape or colour, and thus simultaneously affirming their membership and their difference¹⁰.

Everyone knows that the purchase of a piece of fashionable clothing involves the question of wearability: “am I really going to wear this?” (A tendency to reply to this question in the affirmative however, varies to a spectacular extent according to the individual). Wearability is an equation with multiple parameters. It includes the practical and objective properties of comfort, functionality and resistance: a garment that squishes the body, prevents movement, or threatens to fall apart will not easily be considered to be wearable. But these material aspects don’t count as much in the wearability judgement stakes as the social validation factor. Something that is wearable must get a pass from the group, or more to the point, it is more generally through the negative that the property of wearability is evaluated and formulated: something wearable

is something that causes no eyebrows to be raised, no ridicule (or any other hint of consternation). However this is a parameter that is difficult to establish because it is firstly very context-sensitive¹¹, each social group having its own frame of reference in terms of wearability, and secondly, because the wearability judgment call is made according to the personal convictions of each individual member of the group, but also according to meta-representations, meaning beliefs held by each member of the group about the personal convictions of the other group members¹². The social wearability of a garment is not an intrinsic property: it is a function, at a given moment, of a collection of representations and meta-representations. The first criteria that decides the wearability to a greater or lesser extent (the “wearability value”) is not based or rooted in the object, and depends only on the synthesis of opinions and judgements about what the opinions might be: the best strategy, in order to avoid a faux pas and to dress with discernment, does not consist of finding one’s own style, but of calculating, to the best of one’s ability, the consensus of outside opinions with which one may be confronted. This mechanism gives rise, in principle, to an infinite regression (or arbitrarily finite which is the same thing) of set beliefs. Let’s suppose that Paul finds himself having to evaluate the wearability of a garment G. So:

– At phase 0 of the process Paul has personal convictions of varying strengths (intuition, or knowledge linked to his education or his culture) as to the social wearability of G¹³. He knows however that it is not his own taste that will solely define the wearability value of G, but that of the entire community.

– At phase 1 Paul calculates the consensus of other peoples’ opinions about the wearability of G to the best of his ability.

– But at phase 2, Paul, guessing that others are doing the same thing as him, that is to say calculating the opinions of the others in

the group to the best of their ability to establish the wearability of G, starts to calculate the consensus of opinions of others about the consensus of the opinions of the group about the wearability of G.

– Thus, for n, we can always define a phase n+1, where what Paul calculates is the consensus of the opinions of others about the consensus calculated by Paul at phase n.

If we reasoned like this in the real world, the fashion industry would collapse, as no one would be in a position to decide as to the wearability or unwearability of a given garment: an infinite number of mental calculations would be necessary before making a judgement which is impossible for a human being. So how do fashion consumers avoid this situation of “undecidability”? Thanks to the existence of conventions that belong to clothing alone, that create a middle ground between the decent and the obscene, the formal and the casual, the discreet and the gaudy, the flattering and the ridiculous, and pass judgement on the representations of what is wearable as everyone is convinced that these conventions are common knowledge¹⁴. So all is well as long as each person feels incited and feels that others are incited to act according to these conventions: the motivation that pushes a member of a community to follow them is precisely the belief that everyone else will do likewise. But the reasons for thinking that some people ignore or do not respect the conventions of wearability, or worse, that some believe that others ignore or do not respect them are legion: the rules of etiquette are notoriously volatile, and it is reasonable to doubt that the people whose opinion matters to us keep up to date with their fluctuations in real time. Just like in the financial markets, where investor confidence depends on the fluidity of trade, fashion consumers must be provided with some form of guarantee. Precisely, TV series can be seen as sartorial insurance policies for four reasons.

The fashion coach series

Reason 1: the length of exposure helps to get used to something

Repetition over time in TV series establishes a particular relationship between characters and their costumes. The use of narrative continuity has two opposing effects, both absent in the cinema. Either a character wears the same thing all the time, like The Fonz and his black airman's jacket in *Happy Days* (a Western Costumes mythical garment now on show at the Smithsonian Museum), and the series becomes an amazing long-term showcase for a product that it automatically promotes. Or the opposite, the return of a character on screen leads to an exploration of their wardrobe: so for each character a style is displayed like a look book for a seasonal collection. In *Gossip Girl*, even though Chuck Bass changes his suit a number of times per episode, he is no less individualised through his clothing style than the Fonz in *Happy Days*, with his exuberant and brightly coloured reworking of the American dandy à la Gatsby/Ralph Lauren. Whether it is on the scale of the room or the wardrobe, the serial narrative form means that the dress behaviour of the characters is seen by viewers as a habit. And as Montaigne said "habit is second nature, and no less powerful"¹⁵: the stylistic constancy of the characters unconsciously establishes the equivalence between the worn and the wearable. To perceive something as normal is a mere question of recurrence: what one sees often becomes natural. This explains how fashion creations that in theory are far from our own frame of reference can become familiar and desirable through the intermediary of a TV character.

Since 2007, the Faroe Islands-based firm of Gudrun & Gudrun, that specialises in organic chunky hand-knits has had untold success: orders are flowing in from England, the US and Japan. The main target of the frenzy is a

"traditional" white jumper with black snowflakes, thousands of which are sold annually. It is priced at 290 euros and one would have imagined it reserved to a clientele of enlightened connoisseurs of Faroe folklore and fans of the Horse and Hound look. The snowflake sweater became an international best seller thanks to the Danish series *Forbrydelsen* (*The Killing*) that after being broadcast domestically on the national Danish channel DR1 was bought by BBC 4 and a number of other broadcasters around the world. The main character in *Forbrydelsen*, the far from glamorous deputy Sarah Lund, wears the Gudrun sweater in seasons 1 and 3. One would have a hard time imagining Lund as a muse for a perfume or any cosmetic line: she hardly ever changes her clothes, wearing the sweater with baggy jeans and a boiled wool overcoat. Lund seems to have given up on making even the slightest effort to look pretty or important and is quite unremarkable at first. She is rather beautiful but her face is marked with fatigue and worry. She is entirely absorbed by her job to the point of obsession and self-sacrifice, and looks for clothes that are comfortable and functional like the snowflake sweater so as to be able to forget them. But from the point of view of the viewer of *Forbrydelsen* the opposite occurs: the Gudrun fisherman's sweater rapidly becomes an emblem, signifying, in the words of the actress Sofie Gråbøl who plays Lund that "a person who doesn't use her sexuality – that's a big point. Lund's so sure of herself she doesn't have to wear a suit. She's at peace with herself". *Forbrydelsen* defends the notion of sartorial honesty: we are always at our advantage in an outfit that shows who we really are, rather than in a disguise aimed at making ourselves look more powerful in the eyes of others. In the end, this asexual and garish Gudrun sweater, that at first may seem to viewers difficult to integrate into their usual environment, evokes a promise of emancipation and authenticity that makes it quite wearable.

Reason 2: everyday familiarity that reassures

Series tend to focus on the everyday lives of their protagonists and when we start to follow a series, our own daily lives become mixed up with that of the series. So the proximity of the characters renders their clothing wearable: they are being worn by people who are familiar to us. It is of course an illusion, as like in the cinema, the series absorbs the clothes into a symbolic system of images and desires which is not simply a question of the simple reproduction of an average everyday existence. The clothes acquire a new meaning that make them more distinctive and potentially attractive. But, at the same time, because the series narrative creates a routine, the gap between the fantasy and the ordinary narrows and the costume becomes a mere garment once again.

Gossip Girl (The CW, 2007-2012), a series that presented itself as “Your one and only source into the scandalous lives of Manhattan’s elite”, provides a paradox for analysis that is nothing if not ironic: while the heroes all belong to the billionaire elite of New York’s Upper East Side, *Gossip Girl* influenced fashion consumer behaviour in its young viewers (15-30) more than any other teen series. Serena Van der Woodsen (Blake Lively), Blair Waldorf (Leighton Meester) and their friends belong to a world that is straight from a magazine: their luxury wardrobes seem as inaccessible to the common or garden viewer as their autarchic way of life from townhouses, to penthouses, five-star hotels, limousines and summers in the Hamptons.

In fact, the theme of the rich among themselves and the implacable determination of these well-born people to maintain the integrity of their circle that cannot be accessed with money alone as one must be to the manor born, is at the centre of *Gossip Girl*. The everyday lives depicted in this series are out of reach to most people. This is what makes the outfits worn by Serena, Chuck or Blair so

attractive: even in our democratic societies, the people covet the attributes of the elite. Wedding dresses designed by Vera Wang or Elie Saab (31000\$) inevitably reactivate the princess fantasies of young and not so young viewers. On this point, Mona Chollet or Alice Augustin¹⁶, for whom the whole interest of the series lies mainly in what it shows, the decors and costumes, are not wrong. In fact *Gossip Girl* perfectly captures the collusion between high society and the fashion industry: Eleanor Waldorf, Blair’s mother is at the head of her own couture house, Jenny Humphrey is a trainee designer, the young ladies of the Upper East Side occasionally model, act as muses for designers and a shopping trip to Barneys is hardly more exotic for them than a trip to the neighbouring mall is for the average young American. But the question of wearability comes back: by focussing on a world of absolute opulence, are we not running the risk of dissuading the viewer from taking the heroes of *Gossip Girl* seriously as stylistic models?

The *Gossip Girl* dilemma is similar to that facing luxury brands: to awaken the desire in everyone for something that only few own, to suggest restricted or reserved access while at the same time not discouraging or excluding. *Gossip Girl* solves this problem in an exemplary and perverse manner, giving the chronicle the cheap format of a soap. The powerful, not like in Bossuet or Saint Simon, where the grandeur is praised, are watched from above: the very format of the soap requires a frenzied narrative focussed on love stories, capricious behaviour, vices and underhand dealings that must blend endless U-turns and spectacular revelations. Subject to this regime of social trickery and short-lived crushes, the heroes of *Gossip Girl* have none of the phlegm, cool headedness or depth of the heroes of *Mad Men*. They are under pressure from a narrative mechanism that is morally neutral while being dramaturgically inflexible. The result means that the

viewer forgets the difference in earning with the series' protagonists and considers them as friends: their extreme level of comfort works as a magnifying glass on the universal questions of the heart, snobbery, family ties, and the status of the work of art¹⁷, which interest everyone and are given free rein in the series thanks to the fact that the heroes are under no pressure in terms of time or money. By creating this complicity with the oligarch (without which a series about the super-rich would be impossible to take), *Gossip Girl* sets up a framework that encourages the wearability of the clothing styles depicted. The styling of the series reinforces the wearable character in three complementary ways. First of all, each protagonist is characterised by a very codified style: Blair's style is sexy but preppy, with pleated skirts, plain shirts and hairbands covering up her alluring lacy lingerie, while Serena revisits the pop arty seventies-inspired style not unlike the other boho muses such as Carrie Bradshaw (Sarah Jessica Parker) in *Sex and the City* and Jessa Johansson (Jemima Kirke) in *Girls*. This enables the viewer to develop aesthetic affinities with a particular character and to take inspiration from their outfits when shopping for their own clothes without necessarily trying to reproduce a head to toe look: the series acts like a magazine, but in a more effective way because the models are characters we frequent every day. In addition, the styling of *Gossip Girl* repeats the successful recipe of mixing luxury and high street brands: it is credible as the elite of today stand out less through their particular taste (as before one's membership of the elite was displayed by the exclusive consumption of certain brands) than by the omnivorous capacity to pick and choose objects and references from diverse sources that they put together with no apparent hierarchical logic¹⁸, and this also means that the outfits worn by the heroines of the series are financially accessible. For example, the Generra top Serena wears

in episode 12 in the first season only costs 68 dollars: so fans pounced on it, guided by the broadcaster's website. Finally, the costume designers' strategy on *Gossip Girl* consists mainly of recycling trends observed elsewhere, mainly in *Teen Vogue*, rather than imposing a particular aesthetic: the signature look for season one – the combination of the uniform from Manhattan's private schools with luxury shoes and accessories – was replaced (because the heroines had graduated high school) by a range of outfits that were on trend but had already been seen elsewhere. With a sleight of hand, what is presented to the viewer as the choice of the elite is already something she is aware of: the preppy girl, the bohemian, and even Jenny Humphrey's emo trash style are all looks borrowed from magazines. The fact that the characters dress like this or that has no real value in terms of discovery, just in terms of sanctification.

Reason 3: sartorial choices as plot lines

In a TV series that focuses on everyday gestures, clothes are elevated to the status of narrative objects. They can then be given a much more detailed and complex treatment than in film: we have time to see a character hesitate over a skirt or a scarf. Dressing practices are reproduced according to a drawn-out mimesis of their consumption and use, while in the cinema we are most often presented with the character fully dressed. A series, because it shares the dressing intimacy of the characters, constitutes a style lab for the viewer. It is vain to criticise series such as *Gossip Girl* for sacrificing the script in favour of the costumes: the clothes are precisely a capital ingredient in the story as they are a capital ingredient in the lives of a great number of viewers.

Carrie Bradshaw (Sarah Jessica Parker), and narrator of *Sex and the City* (HBO, 1998-2004), a journalist living in a small studio apartment on the Upper East Side is not a member of the moneyed elite as seen in *Gossip Girl*.

This doesn't stop her from frequenting the same stores and spending more than is reasonable on luxury brands: Blahnik, Jimmy Choo and Louboutin shoes, Vuitton, Dolce and Gabbana, Prada, Westwood clothes, Dior and Gucci bags... In the gang of women friends made up of Miranda, the career obsessed and cynical lawyer (power suits, Helmut Lang), Samantha, the nymphomaniac public relations expert (a Versace MILF) and Charlotte the WASP gallery manager (Ralph Lauren), Carrie is the poorest but the most striking. She lives for and through her clothes, saying that when she was young and broke, she preferred to buy *Vogue* and skip dinner, as she felt "it fed (her) more". It is hard to sum up Carrie's varied style, an experimental patchwork that at times lacks grace, revealing an overly enthusiastic and almost bulimic passion for clothes. The tone is set in the opening credits when we see her parading through Manhattan in a tutu, getting copiously splashed by a passing bus (on which there is an advert for her column in *The New York Star*).

Sex and the City most probably changed most viewers' perspective on their own fashion habits. From afar, Carrie Bradshaw is an amalgam of all of the misogynistic stereotypes of city dwelling women: spendthrift, superficial, egocentric and inconstant. The *fashion victim* in all her splendour and ridicule, but is she? On the contrary, the series turns the value system on its head: Carrie's compulsion to buy is not symptomatic of hysteria but a deliberate life choice, opposed by Carrie to her contemporaries, so as she is less a brainless figure at the mercy of an all-powerful industry than an avant-garde feminist leader. The equivalence between frivolity and freedom is the feminine transposition of the baudelarian dandy¹⁹: the originality and courage of her choices manifest a clearly autonomous taste, an affront to convention and good morals. Everything plays out clearly in episode 9 of the sixth season ("A Woman's Right to Shoes") where Carrie

goes to a friend's house for a party, the friend is now married with children. At the door guests are asked to remove their shoes to protect the floor. When leaving, disaster strikes: Carrie's sandals have disappeared. Then, negotiations begin between the two friends, one demanding damages for what has happened, the other claiming that the price of the sandals ("not sandals, Manolos!" Carrie yells) is indecent. Two lines of argument become clear. The mother says that "before I had a real life, I used to buy Manolos too". Carrie is the same age, she should settle down, have kids, give up her puerile consumerist and now cumbersome libido. Carrie confides her woes to Miranda who supports her entirely: "if you had lost her baby at a party, believe me she would be looking for damages". This clash reveals that the duty of motherhood is not greater than "A woman's right to shoes", regardless of how much they cost. Through a fight caused by the loss of a pair of Manolo sandals, the series expounds on the possibility of another fate for the thirty-something woman. It is not surprising then that *Sex and the City* enabled viewers to feel their fashion consumption was legitimate regardless of how extravagant or excessive.

Taken literally, what *Sex and the City* is saying that wearability is of little import. Only individual style choices matter. Is this not in contradiction with what we affirmed to begin with, that series make the clothes worn by their protagonist's wearable? Without a doubt, the outfits Carrie wears, already relatively risqué in the rarefied New York circles she frequents, would be totally out of place in the everyday life of an average viewer. On the other hand, *Sex and the City* promotes an individualistic way of life and society, where the main values are originality, personal accomplishment and directing one's own life. In episode 2 of season 4 ("The Real Me"), the organiser for a multi-brand fashion show blending professional models and high-profile New Yorkers asks

Carrie to take part. She hesitates, fearing she would look ridiculous beside Heidi Klum. Bolstered by encouragement from her best friends, convinced that for an ardent fashionista like Carrie it would be sacrilege to turn down the opportunity to be in a show, she overcomes her complexes and says yes. She is not out of the woods yet, though: at the last minute she finds out she won't be wearing the pretty blue sequined dress but a pair of gem-incrusted knickers. As if that weren't bad enough, once she gets up on the runway Carrie falls in front of everyone. The voiceover begins and as narrator she learns a very American life lesson: "I had a choice. I could slink off the runway and let my inner model die of shame, or I could pick myself up, flaws and all, and finish. And that's just what I did because when real people fall down in life, they get right back up and keep on walking..." According to this vision of existence, the value of an individual depends on the intensity of what drives them (for example Carrie's sincere love of fashion): it is a moral that pushes one going beyond oneself, beyond the limits the outside world places on the strength of individual will. In a world like Carrie's, the wearability of a garment becomes a logical paradox²⁰: only that which is unwearable is wearable and vice versa. If a garment is unwearable, then he or she who wears it stands out with distinction from the group. But as recognition is given only to that person that stands out if their outfit, which was thought to be unwearable by the others in as much as no one would dare to wear it, betting on the social disapproval it would have caused, becomes *de facto* wearable, that is to say approved by the collective at the very moment it is worn. Inversely, that which is wearable is unwearable: conformity, in the era of personal development and self-actualisation has become a vice that the community disapproves of. The wearability gauge gets more complicated in the world of *Sex and the City*: in order to calculate in

advance what will be judged to be wearable, to foresee not what the others feel to be wearable at a given time (t) but what they judge to be unwearable and thus wearable at time t+1. Is this necessarily the same in the world of the viewer? The progress of the ideology of self-actualisation on a planetary level is not something one can reasonably doubt, but the vision of the series in 2013 already seems a tad anachronistic: belief in the all-powerful idea of individual willpower now seems naive now that our lives are dominated by connections and membership of immaterial networks.

Reason 4: the group dimension and the validation of the collective

In the past, series were, for the most part, "finished off" (each episode told a one-off story) and focused on a unique hero whose different adventures followed one another without a real evolution over time. Modern TV series have a more "serial" nature (each episode is a part of the bigger picture that lasts at least for the season), and are more about a group, meaning that an equal amount of screen time is allotted to a number of main characters. This is a quality inherent to the genre: it is impossible in feature films, unless you give up on narrative continuity, to really tell a number of stories, with a different hero at the centre of each. The series format does this easily, and this is one of its main attractions, as the increase in the number of heroes means and increase in the number of storylines: series are all about weaving, interconnecting fates that converge and diverge, which increases the level of interest in each line *and* when each of these lines cross over.

All series take place in a given society. And the point of view of the series on its characters and their behaviour is in general sociological, where one observes perhaps not so much the individual motivation but the way the group functions. This preference in series for the "social fact" in the Durkheim sense, meaning

for “a collection of ideas, beliefs, feelings of all types that happen through the individuals”²¹ but which goes beyond their control and constrains them, naturally means that it is easy to feature clothing and wearability issues linked to the social sanctions they are so often used for. Better than any other form of representation, the TV series can play the role of arbiter of wearability: the clothes that don’t set off any reticence on the part of the local population within the little world we belong to for the length of the viewing (and no doubt for much longer as we are marked by series quite extensively), are deemed to be wearable there and so also wearable here, for us. And the opposite is also true! In episode 6 of the second season of *Girls* (2013), a show that chronicles the lives of a group of twenty-somethings in New York, one of the heroines, Marnie, who works in an art gallery, acts as hostess at a party in the home of a conceptual artist Booth Jonathan, with whom she also happens to have just spent the night. For the occasion she wears a two-layered dress, made of a tube top and mini-shirt in gold, crocodile vinyl underneath a plastic transparent mini crinoline: a more decorative than practical outfit verging on the ridiculous. But why ridiculous? Because the dress produces a cringe comedy effect? Because it is evidence of Marnie’s mistake, as she thought she was Booth’s new girlfriend when as far as he was concerned she was actually working for him (gallery hostess during the day, party hostess at night). The plastic dress, as flamboyant as it is uncomfortable, reminds Marnie of her romantic naiveté as much as her social insignificance: the outfit that was to cement her status as an *it girl* becomes a cumbersome wrapping, through which her dashed hopes can be seen, and in which the young woman surely feels less like Edie Sedgwick and more like Gregor Samsa. As a viewer I realise that something is wrong with this dress: it is not wearable in the context of Booth’s party, but it is not wearable

in my home either. To watch a series means to adopt, for the duration of the viewing at least, all of the tacit life rules it displays. Half way through the second season of *Girls*, my knowledge of these rules has filled out due to the fact that I’ve been sharing the characters’ everyday lives, in a way I have integrated them through force of habit, so well that I immediately and infallibly spot Marnie’s mistake, and much better than she does, as my point of view on the ins and outs of the protagonists of *Girls* is that of the *Girls* society overall, and not the partial, closed off point of view of an individual member of this society. This type of viewing contract, by virtue of the fact that the world of series becomes that of the person watching, explains that series lend themselves to a type of collective consumption. Forums, blogs, recaps, fan clubs and even conventions are booming. Series also occupy conversations offline. They are the basis for massive social interaction, the form of which merits our attention: the pleasure involved in talking about characters and the adventures they are caught up in is the same as if we were talking about a third party in their absence, with others who also know them. The heroes of our TV series are close to us and we share this with other viewers. We, fans of *Gossip Girl*, see Serena’s sky blue top and talk about it as if it were the latest purchase by a chic girl in our social group. At a time of digital influence, the sources of sartorial influence that have the most traction are no longer the recognised big authoritarian figures and have gone down a more democratic path where the most legitimate recommendation is that of our peers, so characters from TV series are the new style icons. Because it does not constitute a continuation of the everyday life of each spectator taken alone, but of the entire community that is following it, a series can modify the conventions that rule over the wearability of clothes in to our own environment: While I have identified by watching *Sex and the City*, *Mad Men* or *Forbrydelsen*, a

sartorial practice tolerated in the world of the series and thus in mine, other viewers of the same shows have done the same thing at the same time. I know that I am not the only one to have recognised that sweater or those leggings as totally wearable: everyone knows that every else approves also, and by definition this is what constitutes the criteria of wearability.

The length of time the garments are exposed, a sense of proximity with the characters wearing them, meticulous attention to the signification of clothes as fact and the integration of the social validation necessary for the evaluation of the wearability: these are the four motifs that explain why series play the role of “style coach”. Clothes that are featured in a series appear simultaneously desirable – this is the effect of integrating objects in the narrative, it also happens in the cinema – and as wearable – is the effect that only the routine orchestrated by the serial genre can have. Beyond these generic specifics of serial fiction, what the analysis of the wearability gained by clothing featured in TV series teaches us is how permanent the empire of television is on our lives and representations. This empire was conquered by TV because it distracts the viewer from their solitude in two ways. Firstly it speaks to the viewer’s secret need for voyeurism and all-powerfulness by overdosing them with images that can’t look back at the viewer. But perhaps it reassures them even more effectively as it places them in the centre of a network of voyeurs that can’t see one another, but know that everyone has also seen what he or she was supposed to have seen alone.

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1. I would like to thank Denis Bonnay and Clara Maignan for their precious advice and their re-reading that was kind but without concession.

2. “Film and Fashion: Just Friends”, *New York Times*, March 3rd 2010.
3. Michel Mourlet, Sur un art ignoré, *Cahiers du cinéma*, n° 98, August 1959.
4. “David Lynch keeps his Head”, in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again*, 1997.
5. Roland Barthes, “En sortant du cinéma”, in *Communications*, 23, 1975, 104-107.
6. Aristotle, *Poetic*.
7. In a way very similar to the one Barthes mentioned to characterise the abundance of descriptive details with no relation to the plot in the realist novels of the 19th century Barthes, “L’effet de réel”.
8. A reader in the know might object that this difference between *The Hobbit* and *Game of Thrones* could be simply explained not as we suggest by the difference between film and television but by the difference between the novels that the adaptations have merely followed: the rhythm and epic density of Tolkien’s linear novel is counterpointed by the psychological digressions and the contemplative slowness of Martin’s polyphonic novels. We have two answers to this. First of all, which the fact that Tolkien was adapted for the cinema and Martin for television is not by chance: the formal constraints on the work adapted vary according to the final format (big or small screen). And then, let us challenge the reader in question to find a series whose speed and density in terms of events is comparable to those of a Hollywood film. Even in *24*, the seriously fast-paced action series, the characters’ ordinary lives (breakfast, couples fighting, supermarket trips, babysitting, and flirts, partying with soft drugs...) are the backdrops of the intrigue and form an important part of the narration.
9. Cf. Benjamin Simmenauer, “La série télévisée : un ars dominandi”, in *Mode de Recherche* n° 19, January 2013, for a more detailed description of the techniques of influence at work in TV series.
10. Cf. Georg Simmel’s analysis in “La Mode”, in *La Tragédie de la Culture*, reworked by Guillaume Erner in *Sociologie des tendances*, PUF, Que sais-je ?, 2008, chapter 5.
11. Outfits adored by graphic artists in Paris would be intolerable if not totally grotesque for a pharmacy owner in Cannes.
12. Let us suppose that to illustrate this point I am tempted by a pair of red moccasins and I am wondering just how wearable they are. In fact, I am asking myself two types of question. On the one hand, the basic question that enables me to refine my direct evaluation of the red moccasins: I wonder if they are really to my taste, what they will go with in my existing wardrobe, or even if red is a shoe colour at all. On the other hand I wonder on a different level if my wife

is not going to roll her eyes when she sees me in red shoes? Am I running the risk of drawing too much attention to myself at the office? Will I appear to be a straitlaced man who only dares to jazz up his feet? These questions are aimed at the representations of others as I anticipate them to be.

13. For example Paul may think that white socks are not the done thing because his mother and sisters read this on a fashion blog.

14. We recognise the mechanism by which prices on the financial market remain stable. All of this wearability analysis reworks the “beauty contest” argument used by Keynes to explain how the market price is fixed (*The general theory of employment, interest and money*, chapter 12, 1936), and the use of this theoretical model to analyse the social significance and means of spreading trends by Guillaume Erner, for example in *Sociologie des tendances*.

15. Michel de Montaigne, *Essais*, Livre III, chap. 10 « De mesnager sa volonté ».

16. “An episode of *Gossip Girl* is like a fashion spread, successive tableaux where the occasion – a tea party, a sleepover, etc. – dictates the story almost, analyses Alice Augustin. In the end we don’t really care about the story, we are just watching for the enjoyment factor...”, in Pierre Langlais, “*Gossip Girl*: la série magazine de mode”, *Slate*, 27/04/2010, <http://www.slate.fr/story/20357/gossip-girl-serie-magazine-de-mode>; and “The plot lines are contrived, the unexpected developments improbable. Everything seems to be set up for the viewer to only half-follow the dialogue (“You are my best friend, how could you sleep with my boyfriend?”) and instead concentrate on the decors, the characters’ wardrobes and every detail of the luxurious universe they live in: Oh, the dress! Oh, the hotel room! Oh, the necklace!, etc.”, in Mona Chollet, “*Gossip Girl*: célébration des élites américaines”, *Le Monde Diplomatique*, août 2010.

17. Through the character of the writer, Dan, who is also the person behind the “*Gossip Girl*” blog and as such the intra-diegetic narrator of the series, the theme of the link between literature and life is major.

18. Cf the classic article on the subject: Richard A. Peterson and Roger M. Kern “Changing Highbrow Taste: From Snob to Omnivore”, *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 61, n° 5 (Oct. 1996), p. 900-907.

19. Baudelaire, *Le Peintre de la Vie Moderne*, IX, “Le Dandy”, 1863.

20. According the liars paradox: suppose someone shows up and says “I’m lying!” Is that true? If so, then he is lying so he’s not lying otherwise he is not lying so he is lying.

21. Durkheim, *Sociologie et philosophie*, Paris, PUF, 1974, p. 79.