

Tensions between Fashion and Modernity

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During the renaissance, fashion seems to have accompanied modernity due to their common premises: throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, the reinforcement of modern thought developed in tandem with the exponential development of the fashion industry, that was to rapidly touch society as a whole, from the aristocracy to the bourgeoisie down to the ordinary people in the villages and countryside via servants and fairs and markets. Even more recently at the beginning of the post-modern era, a technological age characterised by changing and scattered ideas saw the emergence of a very industrialised, polymorphous, differentiated fashion. So, what is the nature of the link that connects fashion and modernity? A shared aversion for inertia due to a need for progress and novelty? However, doesn't fashion represent the very negation of modernity as it imposes itself on the subject as a thing in itself? And what if this union was but a symptom of modernity going slightly off the rails?

Under the reign of François I^{er}, and then under Henri II, various edicts were decreed that forbade the bourgeoisie from wearing gold or silver fabrics, or from decorating their garments with pearls. These extravagant laws transposed the customs of a secular morality into canonical norms, notably encouraging moderation in the consumption of material goods, in line with one's place in the social hierarchy.

A tradition was thus established with a very strict hierarchy in terms of what could and could not be worn. Clothes were codified in terms of shape –the size and cut of dresses were regimented– as were materials –silk was reserved for the presidents of the Cours des comptes, satin for the King's people, taffeta for the clerks...

It is tempting to see these edicts as the high point of the tradition. However, they marked its decline: in fact, when legislation is called on to forbid deviant behaviour in a society that is regimented by dress, this means in general that this deviant behaviour already exists and is widespread enough to require sanctions. So, the 1514 edict that strictly forbade "all persons, commoners, non nobles (...) to set themselves up as noble through their dress or their qualities"¹, signalled the real existence of attitudes that go against tradition –in this case the wearing of garments normally reserved for the aristocracy by people who did not belong to the aristocracy.

Here we can analyse the issue in two ways. On the one hand, by concentrating on the specific object –the garment– we can see the first fashion movements in the passing of these decrees. Indeed, as we have seen, if the main objective behind these laws was to legislate on dress codes in terms of social rank, this means that in the 16th century, there was already a sort of "imitative" surge which meant the bourgeoisie copied –or, according to their fiercest adversaries, "aped", the behaviour and manners of the nobility. However, this dress imitation was still illicit in a society based on a symbolic order that promoted the image of an analogical hierarchical world. In this "analogical" world, each rank had its own manners, that included a dress code: so a stiff social hierarchy had a correspondingly stiff dress code, incarnating traditional power struggles and proclaiming the almost "cosmic" authority of the feudal ruling classes. Fashion, understood as a movement of imitation in which a manner, or a type of behaviour or even a "taste" spread through imitation and cross through broader and broader layers of society seems thus to have come into being at this time of transition

between two radically different *epistemes*. So, dress, which until then had changed very slowly, that had only competed against other “geographical” forms of dress seems to have begun to evolve at a faster rate. This is the important point: these decrees signal the end of an era. By stepping back from the specific object, the garment, it is possible to see them as an essentially vain attempt to maintain the validity of an *episteme* that had already been superseded, the episteme founded on tradition. What these dress code laws signified were the beginnings of modernity –if we consider modernity to be an ideal, after the (re)-discovery of the subject, aiming to fight the contingencies of tradition and the arbitrariness of power, by resorting to reason. Fashion and modernity seem thus to be two contemporary movements, born out of a common surge against the prejudices of the order of tradition. In addition, beyond this shared tension, fashion and modernity seem to have been both carried by the emergence of the subject, seen as an autonomous, critical instance guided by reason in the discovery and affirmation of the self. Regarding modernity, this conjecture is almost a tautology: regarding fashion, it can be defended by the analysis of certain of the prescriptions in the *savoir-vivre* (lifestyle) annals that appeared throughout the 16th century. So, according to Erasmus in *The Civilities*, the legitimate manner in which to dress is that which enables one to project an image that is in line with the reality of one’s being: this injunction could of course lead us to think that the subject, having become an eminently central element in thought, was to determine even dress code from then on. But it can also be interpreted as the survival of the old analogical order that links the rank of a person to the very essence of the subject ontologically. In any case, it enables us to understand that fashion can indubitably constitute one of the places where the autonomous and critical subject, promoted by modernity, can be incarnated. It is indeed the case when the subject is not subject to any “transcendence” when it invents a manner of dressing that conforms to what it is or, at least, to what it wants to be. However, are we still talking about fashion? Such occur-

rences are quite uncommon in the history of fashion (which makes them all the more brilliant). They always seem to come from the eccentric, they find their quintessential representative later on in the figure of the dandy: how can the exceptional character of such fashion experiments be explained? Perhaps by the difficulty that is inherent in the very attempt to define fashion according to the criteria of modernity, meaning according to the determinations of an autonomous and critical subject. Who indeed, within a hierarchical society could want to appear as he actually is? If the “sociable man, always outside of himself, only knows how to live in the opinion of others”², then those who are ready to accept the totality of their being are rare, and even less likely to manifest it when the totality of the being is marked with signs of domination.

This is why we doubtless need to come back to our initial definition of fashion, seen as a cyclical and imitative movement, all the more so since this return seems to be founded in history: it would appear in fact that, as early as the revolution, dress could no longer provide information as to the person or their status as appearances had already become quite uniform. However, it inverted the terms of the problem as, in this perspective, fashion appeared as a hindrance to the life of the autonomous and critical subject promoted by modernity. As it made its way, fashion became no longer a “way of dressing” invented by a subject who chose freely with full awareness, between a number of different appearances (as, of course, the idea of inventing fashions is not the case here). On the contrary, fashion exists in cycles, prescriptive trends running through society with the strength of the “thing in itself”, of the unknowable metaphysical object. It manifests itself always not so much as a question of subject, and more a question of the individual cut off from his “ethical whole”. It can appear as irrationally as any natural catastrophe, as unpredictably as a cataclysm, or as regularly as the seasons. In any case, the subject has no practical or rational control over it. This is what is shown in very contemporary analysis, such as that of Barthes in *Système de la Mode*: fashion statements are, for some

{Ensemble A}, the vectors of alienation masked by apparent *naturalness*; for others {Ensemble B}, emanations of a reflexive, tautological arbitrary. In his relation to fashion the individual is located in fine in a relationship of object to object: by agreeing to conform to a trend that they take for a “thing in itself” despite its eminently social essence –“this year’s colour is emerald green”, “this year big bags are all the rage”, “this year high-waisted jeans are in”– they give up being an actor. They adopt a contemplative attitude through which they become spectators of their own existence. Confronted with these trends that the individual can’t really rationalise, they no longer actively participate in the process in which they act on their environment, but absorb the different “fashions” without feeling qualitatively concerned by it. In this way, fashion is closely linked to the process of *reification* and, as such, seems to oppose modernity.

But how do we reconcile this contradiction with the coincidence of fashion and modernity that we saw earlier? How did fashion, that was born with modernity, manage to transform into a contrary phenomenon? Up until now, we have examined issues closely linked with fashion. However, as we noticed in the previous paragraph, fashion brings up the question of reification, and we must now examine the idea of modernity and go back to the very era in which it was invented. For a number of authors, including Norbert Elias, the emergence of the modern subject and the exaltation of reason against the arbitrary nature of tradition can not be separated from the transformations happening within the social structure. Thus, the low Renaissance is characterised by the rise in strength of the bourgeoisie, “needy”, then industrious, historically harbingers of new values, individualist and utilitarian, the absolute opposite of feudal morals. In addition, this period saw the twilight of the aristocracy, considered in its historical military role. The aristocracy was confronted with the constitution of the centralised and absolute monarchic state, and thus taken up in an irreversible process of “curialisation” by which the practices of the court spread beyond the court, and the disappearance of the tradi-

tional foundations of its legitimacy. This double movement set up a frenetic competition between the two classes: one fighting for recognition of its new place in society, while the other, under threat, fought to maintain the privileges of its symbolic monopoly. One, modern, fought tradition while the other on the contrary tried to protect it. One, finally tried to imitate the behaviour and manners of the other in order to undermine it, while the other in an endless spiral, fought back by rendering its manners and behaviour even more sophisticated, more refined. The successive refinements were for example, the use of a fork, enriching garments, or the privatisation of bodily functions. In general, they marked the beginning of civilisation after that of civilities, the negation of man’s animality and the affirmation of the separation between body and soul –that is to say, the establishment of the real material foundations on which the modern idea of the subject was to develop. But, not only that, they represent the main cause of the first “fashion cycles”, in clothing as in all of the areas of self-presentation, as the nobility were in fact obliged to constantly invent new distinctive codes with their own built-in obsolescence as they were inevitably imitated. So, straight away it is obvious that the shared premises of modernity and fashion are intimately linked to the social upheaval that followed on from the birth of capitalism and the advent of the bourgeoisie. However, while fashion appears to have a dynamic that is strictly determined by capitalistic structures, modernity remains a universal ideal, aiming for the progress of human kind in general going beyond any division of society into classes. But modernity in practice in the reification process mentioned above does not correspond to the “initial”, pre-capitalist ideal of modernity: for the thinkers of the Frankfurt school, reification is a social pathology linked to a certain type of modernity, a deficient modernity guided by technical rationalisation, that is itself but a perverted and incomplete form of the reason celebrated and promoted by the Enlightenment. Habermas thus distinguishes instrumental reason, which is but the implementation of effective means in relation to a

given end, from critical, or decided reason, reduced to silence by the capitalist system. In these conditions, fashion would be reduced to being the symptom of a certain degeneration of Reason, that is to say the derailing of modernity; and as such, the analogy between certain heavy trends in current fashion and the pre-contemporary “administered world” described in the *Dialectic of Reason* is striking. In this work, the authors retrace the history of Reason, from its premise, when it aimed to free man from the weight of myth and tradition, up until the contemporary technological era, where Reason, seen as a simple means of dominating nature, has developed into instrumental reason. For them, our era is a new barbaric age where everything is as homogenous, static, repetitive and difficult to rationalise as in the times of the myth; for us, this description can, to a great extent, reflect the current contradictions in fashion. It is an eminently human creation and manifest itself mainly through massive, “transcendent” and irrational trends. It promises and promotes the new, often seems repetitive, not only due to its fast pace, but also because it endlessly absorbs and reinterprets formal motifs that have become banal. It is very homogenous, even though it promotes the coexistence of different “lifestyles”, it doesn’t seem equipped to get beyond its own reflexive condition. Finally, it is static, as no revolution in the structure or use of clothing seems to have happened for many years. It is indeed the case, just as Walter Benjamin said, the shine of the new is often a decoy that enables a return to the dreaded archaisms.

Fashion, in its current dominant “transcendent” form seems, in many ways, to be the symptom of a social pathology linked to the deficiencies of modernity: a modernity of the surface, consisting much more in terms of blind ignorance of tradition, of love for the new and the celebration of the individual than the promotion of a free, rational autonomous and critical subject. However, on the edges, today as in the past, we note the existence of properly modern fashion behaviour: behaviour through which the subject manifests its distance in relation to the pseudo-naturalism

of fashion, when it decides to take on the codes and play with them. As a possible means of expression, this fashion thus appears as a trace of the latent survival of the pure idea of modernity.

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1. Edict from 1514, quoted in Daniel Roche, *La Culture des apparences*, Paris, Arthème Fayard, 1989, p. 54.

2. Rousseau, *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes*, Paris, Gallimard folio, 1996, p. 123.