

Consumer culture and street fashion

Extending the fashion model to other forms of consumption

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Abstract

It is a fact that fashion, as a system, goes way beyond clothes. The reasons for this extension are mainly economic: fashion avoids market saturation with the regular renewal of the desire to consume. Beyond the economic issues at stake, the real point is to outline the contours of future models of consumption. Here I would like to show in what conditions this extension is possible for other types of consumption (food, automobiles, computers). How is a fashion object produced? I will first have to outline the reasons for fashion's anchorage in clothing. Then, I will examine the conditions necessary to extend it to other sectors of consumption.

Fashion's anchorage in clothing

It is obvious that fashion has extended from clothes to other forms of industry. This means we should be able to outline why fashion in clothes became a front runner. In theory, we should go back to Adam Smith, in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. He presents the hierarchy of the different industries (craftsmanship and fine arts) of his time. At the time, the more durable a product, the higher its aesthetic and social value. Thus architecture was at the top of this hierarchy as its products resisted the actions of time. Music was also quite well placed, as it is an immaterial product which enables it to resist destruction. However, fashion was way down the list in this classification (indeed, the materials that make garments are particularly ephemeral), thus their social and aesthetic value was considered to be low. However, Smith ended up doing a U-turn. In what way? In short, he was less interested in products than in the individual's desire to consume. He said that the value of architecture depends on aesthetic habits and customs and not on the individual's spontaneous capacity to judge it. From this point,

Keywords:
fashion
luxury and extension of
fashion

Smith stated that the classification of the arts of his time was arguable. He went even further. He explained that clothes fashion presented new ways in which to satisfy varied aesthetic appetites. So, fashion went from the bottom of the list to the top thanks to its power to accelerate consumption. In addition, of course, fashion enables product rotation that, in turn produces economic wealth.

We have outlined the historical and economic foundations of the birth of fashion. We must now identify all of the characteristics of fashion that are applicable to other forms of consumption. What are the particularities of fashion consumption?

Fashion: the transformation of the exception into the rule

Luxury might be the origin of fashion. In effect, all industrial products are pieces of art to begin with, even luxury products. So, in fashion, the exception becomes the rule. And fashion spreads through social imitation. The social aim of inventions (or discoveries) is to be, first of all, luxuries. The discovery of cacao was used to satisfy the desire to which it gave birth. So, inventions are imitated by a limited group and then they spread to larger and larger groups, even to society as a whole. And fashion implies large scale imitation and the end of rarity.

Why is luxury such a major element in fashion? In comparison to the industrial process that mass-produces things, luxury introduces a variation. At the same time, the exceptional can come from below (the street, sport, leisure), instead of coming from above (the traditional model) like luxury products. In the invention of fashion, it is essential to distinguish traditional forms and established forms. This is why a criticism of aesthetic traditions and routines is absolutely necessary to impose a fashion system. It is important to emphasize the role of invention which is the real source of value of a product, indeed of all products. It is not work (*cf.* the political economics theses of Smith, Ricardo, Marx) that produces value, as it is merely a repetitive activity: invention produces value. Without invention, the economy would be condemned to imitative stagnation. What are the particularities of fashion consumption?

The particularities of fashion consumption

We should underline the superfluous character of fashion consumption relative to other more elementary industrial products. This is an

important point. Why? What are the categories of industrial products? With an elementary industrial product, the desire to consume exists before its production. Because industry, for the most part, fulfils needs (clothes, food, shelter), it in a basic sense eliminates pain or discomfort. On another level, with fashion, industry creates pleasure. Once a product creates pleasure, it becomes a 'type of luxury'. Why should we still be interested in luxury?

For two reasons: due to the strength of its invention, and because it is a type of consumption that no longer has to correspond to a bodily need. This statement enables us to understand recent evolution where consumption has moved toward superfluous production. Three types of production are capable of going beyond vital necessities. This means that the desire to consume does not exist before the objects do (as is the case with needs). On three different levels we find, art, luxury and fashion. As nations become more civilized, more needs are met, and as a result the more 'useless' products like fashion develop. This reflects a shift from ordinary consumption to aesthetic consumption. For example, in the area of household electrical goods, the use of designers adds an aesthetic dimension to the practical one that stimulates consumption. In addition, the renewal of the aesthetic forms of the object leads to even more consumption.

This was Tarde's theory at the end of the 19th century: "...when a fabric, the cut of a garment, attracts us by its novelty, that we hadn't even suspected existed before, it would appear, not without reason, that this whim is something artistic" (*La logique sociale*, p. 551). In this case, the desire to consume is open, not precisely oriented, and without a clearly identified objective. It is the encounter with the object that brings it to life.

In order to understand this type of consumption, one should concentrate on the question of the its rhythm. What relationship does fashion have with time?

The relationship with time

Fashion leads to a uniformalization of objects in space and to more and more variation in time (fashion cycles). Objects can be the same on a world-wide scale all at the same time. But they are renewed everywhere much faster. Is the chronic renewal of products applicable to any type

of product? In reality, the simple succession of one product by another does not imply a fashion phenomenon. Indeed, products can succeed one another, like in the aeronautical industry, with the aim of fulfilling a need in a more effective and cheaper manner. This is not fashion: it is economic and technical progress. Fashion logic does not involve improving the industrial answer to a need. This is why we should really speak of novelty in fashion rather than innovation. Innovation implies a process of accumulation. Novelty relies mainly on consumer opinion.

Fashion is based on the desire to consume. It aims for the wide scale adoption of a product by the public. What provokes this adoption? Invention, always invention. There are two types of invention: one concerns the product (new combinations of images and sensations); and the other the industrial capacity to make the object spread. The second invention thus gives birth to the desire for the object as it makes it available. One concerns the object, the other concerns the public. Fashion depends on consumers' feeling of 'up-to-dateness'. What is this feeling? Though they are physically far apart, individuals can be satisfied with taking pleasure simultaneously from the same object. Up-to-dateness depends less on the recent character of reality than on the general current interest in the object, based on imitation. This is why the seventies are currently in fashion!

In order to understand the generalization of fashion, we have to observe the way in which the fashion consumer builds his or her opinion.

The relationship with the public

Why should we speak of 'publics' in the plural, rather than consumers? The notion of consumers generalizes ownership: the public is more complex and fluctuating. For the public, the economic dimension is but one of the possible aspects of the relationship with fashion. The media are essential in constructing a public as they ensure communication between individuals (horizontal relationship) and between brands and individual (vertical relationship). Indeed, the growing place of communication technology (internet) gives more weight to the horizontal relationship in the construction of fashion phenomena.

What makes a fashion authority? There are two factors. First, opinions are based on feelings rather than arguments. It is firstly a question of real life experience. Second, the authority of an opinion relies on how

rapidly it spreads and its sphere of influence. It is the only and most effective of fashion aesthetic justifications. Another important point is that if brands produce objects, they also try to produce 'worlds' for public(s). What is a 'world'? It is a combination of desire, feelings and beliefs. The creation of these worlds belongs to the immaterial heritage of a brand. In this way, consumption has a tendency to dematerialize by re-focusing on brands and consumer desire.

Fashion and luxury brands logically rely more and more on the brand's 'equity' than the expertise of the object.

The extensions of fashion

If the departure point for fashion is the exceptional (meaning, frequently, luxury products), tensions appear between fashion and luxury, to the detriment of luxury. The initial difference of luxury disappears when it becomes general fashion. Inversely, one could perfectly conceive of the transformation of an everyday consumer product into a fashion and luxury product. This is very much the case with Nespresso. First of all in the 17th century, coffee was a luxury product reserved for the elite. Then industry spread it to the entire population. Finally, to a certain extent, coffee is becoming a fashion and luxury product again with Nespresso. The reasons are as follows: the invention of capsule technology and selective distribution, thus producing rarity, creates a world of privileged consumers. If invention can not just appear *ex nihilo*, this means that imitation is the source of invention: invention is but imitation, but imitation in the plural, that is "imitations". We will come right back to this.

How can we characterize the application of fashion to objects that are not clothes? It is not a pure invention, it is a re-composition, a transposition. Invention consists of establishing a link between previous inventions, that, until now were independent and foreign to one another. These inventions – from the point of view of the public – circulated separately, but from now on they are presented as linked to one another. They will give each other a boost through this tandem.

Two examples to conclude:

- To begin with, the computer is a technical innovation. Apple associated this innovation with an aesthetic shape. Here the invention is in the association of two independently existing

elements. This can apply to the car, to household electrical good, and so on,

- For its part, fashion can extend to other areas like food. This is the case of the Fauchon brand. The codes of luxury and fashion are transplanted (eroticism, aesthetics, femininity, the collection principle applied to meals) to food. In itself there is nothing really new: the novelty is in the re-composition of elements that already existed separately.

Conclusion

In all cases, fashion relies on the introduction of an aesthetic factor. This aesthetic factor is added to the practical or technical use of an element that stimulates consumption. In addition, as aesthetic appetites are variable and easily influenced, they benefit the acceleration of consumption.

If this schema is economically efficient, it poses problems on a social level: the connection with objects is weakened, made ephemeral, and the production of waste (objects that are no longer fashionable) is even greater. How can fashion be extended in a responsible manner?

About the author

Olivier Assouly studied for his Masters (DA) in 1992 at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales. He then went on to teach philosophy from 1996 to 2002. In addition to the numerous articles he has written on fashion and gastronomy, he has written two books on eating practices and behavior. He has also edited a collective work *Le luxe. Essais sur la fabrique de l'ostentation (Luxury products. Essays on the manufacture of ostentation)* (IFM/Regard). He joined the IFM in 2003 and is currently head of Research and Publishing.

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