Seize the Day
A critique of artisanship in the system of fashion

Keywords: politics / consumption / Carpe Diem

Abstract

This paper examines the place of artisanal garments and footwear within the structure of the system of fashion. The paper argues that, when considered in relative isolation, artisanal garments may represent the antithesis of or indeed an antidote to the systems of fashion and consumption. If, however, the place of such objects is examined more broadly within the hierarchy of the system of fashion, it is seen that they in fact represent the impetus for the relentless cyclicality of this system. The paper focuses upon the label Carpe Diem. Although no longer in operation, the label's pieces invariably embodied an artisanal production, and many items employed hand-worked materials. The label represents a particularly interesting object of study on account of the fact that it never engaged in advertising, whilst its founder, Maurizio Altieri, declined interviews and even refused to be photographed.

Introduction

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The paper proffers a Baudrillardian analysis of a particular type of fashion and the mode of consumption which corresponds to it. Jean Baudrillard's work continues to yield many of the most discerning analyses of the structures of consumption. In order to ground this analysis, I focus upon the label Carpe Diem. Although no longer in operation, Carpe Diem represents a most interesting object of study: the label's pieces invariably embodied an artisanal production, and many items employed hand-worked materials, such as boiled cashmere or leathers whose preparation involved burial in a desert for months on end. The label is particularly interesting on

account of the fact that it never engaged in advertising, whilst its founder, Maurizio Altieri, declined interviews and even refused to be photographed.

Inconspicuity as anti-consumerism

I would like to begin by indicating the way in which artisanal fashion might be understood as anti-consumerist. To recognise the possibility of such an analysis, it is necessary to appreciate the fundamentally competitive character of contemporary consumption and, correspondingly, the historical conspicuity of luxury goods. On this matter, we cannot look past Thorstein Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1953), first published in 1899. It is in this text that Veblen introduces his notion of 'conspicuous consumption'. Whilst the term 'conspicuous consumption' is heard commonly enough, the concept is rarely expounded and its subtleties are frequently lost. This concept, however, remains strongly relevant to the contemporary fashion system, and indeed it is implicit in much of Baudrillard's work, so I shall take this opportunity to recount Veblen's understanding of conspicuous consumption in some detail.

Veblen traces a genealogy of consumption that locates the roots of capitalist consumption in the distinction between different types of employment in 'barbarian culture' (1953: 23). Specifically, he recognises as honorific such employments as hunting and war; these are distinguished from 'vulgar' productive employments. What distinguishes the former from the latter is the characteristic of *exploitation*. The distinction here is between exploitation and subjection, between the "acquisition of substance by seizure" (Veblen 1953: 28) and mere industry. This distinction between employments is typical of that which Veblen terms an 'invidious' distinction or comparison, "a process of valuation of persons in respect of worth" (Veblen 1953: 40). This is "a distinction of a personal kind—of superiority and inferiority" (Veblen 1953: 25), an expression of relations of power. It is, at base, a *class* distinction.

Veblen proceeds with the observation that, in more developed societies, such as feudal societies, a 'leisure class' evolves, namely a class which does not need to engage in work but which can instead rely upon the labour of others for its own survival. This is a class which exists on the strength of its exploitation of the products of the lower classes. In such societies, it is understood that the institution of private property will also be developed, and so wealth becomes an accepted measure of status:

> Property set out with being booty held as trophies of the successful raid. … But so soon as the custom of individual ownership begins to gain consistency, the point of view taken in making the invidious comparison on which private property rests will begin to change. … The possession of wealth, which was at the outset valued simply as an evidence of efficiency, becomes, in popular apprehension, itself a meritorious act. (Veblen 1953: 36-37)

Insofar as the possession of wealth in this way constitutes the basis of esteem, we might imagine that persons would be lead to be frugal, so as to maximise their wealth. Veblen observes, however, that this is not the case. In fact, he contends that the opposite is true, for "it is not sufficient merely to possess wealth or power. The wealth or power must be put in evidence, for esteem is awarded only on evidence" (Veblen 1953: 42). And so, from the need to exhibit one's wealth—that is, one's power—arises the institution of 'conspicuous consumption'. The conspicuous consumption of objects can therefore be understood as an expression of relations of power, or as a system of demonstrable one-upmanship.

It is in relation to consumption understood in this way that Carpe Diem might be viewed as anti-consumerist. Carpe Diem pieces are admittedly not cheap; the price of a pair of Carpe Diem boots, for example, averages around the thousand pound mark. Significantly, however, they are not *conspicuously* expensive. Indeed, Carpe Diem pieces are typically humble in appearance, and their value is likely to be appreciated only by their wearers. On grounds of this inconspicuity, it might be argued that these items sit outside the system of competitive consumption. Further, their cost would appear to be justified by the time and expense that goes into their construction and the preparation of the materials used in their manufacture. This leads us to another point: because of the heightened quality of these pieces, with respect to materials, cut and finish, a stronger relationship is likely to be engendered between wearer and garment. This should equate to less disposable garments, a trend which would appear to arrest—or at least slow—the cyclical system of fashion. Indeed, Carpe Diem pieces were not the products of trends but were the product of a singular, uncompromising vision of design. One admirer of the label has fittingly described its products as "timeless" ('*sayan' 2005).[1]

On account of their craftsmanship, or at least on account of their cost, Carpe Diem pieces are more likely to be *collected* than *consumed per se*. Of course, such a mode of consumption is not unique in the sphere of fashion; it can also be seen, for example, in the case of haute

couture, which certainly attracts buyers whose concern is not everyday use. What distinguishes a label like Carpe Diem from the world of haute couture, however, is the fact that the latter overtly represents the apex of the fashion industry—here, again, it is its inconspicuity which sets Carpe Diem apart. This effective invisibility is seen—or, rather, unseen—not only in the label's refusal to advertise and its avoidance of press coverage, but also in the fact that the garments themselves are so unassuming in appearance, so unrevealing of their cost. Thus, on the strength of the label's thoroughgoing inconspicuity above all else, it might be said, with Veblen's analysis of consumption in mind, that Carpe Diem pieces are anti-consumerist, in spite of their price.

The logic of fashion

I have indicated the ways in which Carpe Diem might be understood to exist outside the systems of fashion and consumption. Ultimately, however, it is my contention that the label in fact epitomises competitive consumption and that it represents the apex of these systems and the impetus for their continued renewal. In order to appreciate how this may be the case, it is necessary to examine more closely the structure of the system of objects in late capitalist society, as well as the political implications of this structure.

Objects—consumer goods—function as signs. It is probably safe to say that this is acutely understood by all citizens of consumer societies, albeit rarely in such terms. We find a formal recognition and explication of this idea, however, in Baudrillard's concept of *sign-value*. Baudrillard's notion of sign-value refers, of course, to the Marxian concepts of use-value and exchange-value, i.e., the utility and market worth of commodities (Marx 1976: 125–126), and draws also upon Saussurean semiology, specifically Saussure's formulation of the structure of the sign (Saussure 1974: 67). Yet, Baudrillard's concept of sign-value owes much to Veblen's work also—the term refers namely to the capacity of objects to indicate "the being and social rank of their possessor" (Baudrillard 1981: 32). The observation that the system of consumption operates according to a logic of signification, however, carries ideological implications, for signification is characterised by an abstract equivalence. In this way, otherwise profound social oppositions are dissolved. For example, Baudrillard observes that

> In the eighteenth century there was simply no relationship between a 'Louis XV' table and a peasant's table: there was an unbridgeable gulf between the two types of object, just as there was between the two corresponding social classes. No single

> cultural system embraced them both. … The social order was what gave objects their standing. (1996: 137–138)

Today, however, no object escapes the system of consumption. Under no circumstance, for example, could a feudal lord and his serf have entered into an exchange on equal terms. Yet, under capitalism, all persons face the market according to an apparently just law of equivalence. Thus, there is no law which prohibits a worker and his employer from purchasing the same goods. Whilst a peasant of the eighteenth century could in no way have come to possess a 'Louis XV' table, such a table may today be purchased by *anyone*. In other words, all persons are accorded the same *right* to eminence, or, at least, the same right to purchase the signifiers of eminence. This *possibility* of upward mobility is the birthright of all in the consumer society; it is the carrot dangled under the nose of the consumer. To be precise, this *possibility* is the ideological foundation of consumer capitalism.

This ideological possibility of upward mobility is manifest in the hierarchy of the system of objects. According to Baudrillard's analysis (1996: 137–155), there are two polarised classes of object, namely the model and the series. The distinction between model objects and serial objects is, at base, akin to the difference between originals and copies. Significantly, however, a class distinction is implicit here, for the model is the reserve of an elite; it is an ideal to which others aspire, but which they cannot ever obtain. As Baudrillard states, "the series offers the immense majority of people a restricted range of choices, while a tiny majority enjoy access to the model and its infinite nuances. … We are thus indeed clearly dealing with class status and class distinctions" (1996: 149). Of course, this distinction can be seen perhaps nowhere more clearly than in the world of fashion, namely in the difference between couture and ready-to-wear garments.

The distinction between the model and the series, however, is at the same time also all-but-void, because "every single object claims model status" (Baudrillard 1996: 141). This is essential to the ideology of the consumer society, for if there was not something of the model in every object, the egalitarian premise of the system of consumption would collapse. That is to say, although there exists a practical reality that prevents a true equality of persons before objects, the system of consumption promises to everyone equally the *possibility* of attaining the model-object. This potentiality which is promised must therefore be corroborated by the partial fulfilment, in every object, of the consumer's desire for the model. As Baudrillard observes,

“every object is a model, yet at the same time there are no more models. What we are left with in the end are successive limited series, a disjointed transition to ever more restricted series based on ever more minute and ever more specific differences” (1996: 142). In sum, “the model is basically merely an idea, that is, a *transcendence internal to the system*—and the system can continue in its forward flight indefinitely” (Baudrillard 1996: 154).

This ‘indefinite forward flight of the system’ describes nothing other than the logic of fashion. Here lies the ideological consequence of fashion: the “accelerated traffic (circulation) [of objects] in the name of fashion quickly comes to signify and to present a social mobility that does not really exist” (Baudrillard 1981: 50). Fashion is, therefore, “one of those institutions that best restores cultural inequality and social discrimination, establishing it under the pretense of abolishing it” (Baudrillard 1981: 51). In this way, a very real—which is to say insurmountable—class structure persists, hidden behind the illusion of its own absence.

Inconspicuity as metaconsumption

The attention to detail embodied in Carpe Diem pieces is almost second to none; these are certainly *nuanced* objects. In almost every respect, Carpe Diem pieces approach the status of a model, and so it may be understood that they fuel the ‘forward flight’ of the system of consumption. But what of the inconspicuity of Carpe Diem? Does this not place the label outside the system of consumption? Certainly not. The system of consumption is based on a logic of *difference*; it can have no Other, since any manoeuvre that would set a thing apart from the system must invariably be based on the system’s own logic. Thus, while Veblen’s work remains important, we must recognise that it is of another age; his analysis of conspicuous consumption does not capture the full complexity of the contemporary systems of fashion and consumption. As Baudrillard states,

> There is also a full-blown syndrome of anti-consumption, a very ‘modern’ phenomenon which is, at bottom, a *metaconsumption* and acts a cultural indicator of class. The middle classes tend rather toward conspicuous consumption. They are, in this regard, heirs to the great capitalist dinosaurs of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. (1998: 91)

One follower of Carpe Diem has described the label as an “anti-brand” (‘Divo’ 2006)—this is, in fact, a fitting and accurate description. Paradoxically, however, the status of Carpe Diem as an

anti-brand should not be taken to mean that the label's products represent an alternative to the system of consumption. Rather, they represent an apex of this system so unreachable by the majority of consumers that it will never even be known to them. Baudrillard addresses this matter precisely, so I shall quote him once more, at length. He makes clear the fact that the pursuit of status is

> based not on objects or goods as such, but on *differences*. Only in this way can we understand the paradox of 'underconsumption' or 'inconspicuous consumption', i.e. the paradox of prestigious super-differentiation, which is no longer displayed in *ostentation* (Veblen's 'conspicuous consumption'), but in discretion, sobriety and self-effacement. … Differentiation may then take the form of the rejection of objects, the rejection of 'consumption', and yet this still remains the very ultimate in consumption. (1998: 90)

Conclusion

On account of the relationship with the body which their craftsmanship is likely to engender—or, if nothing else, on account of the financial investment which they represent—one would not expect Carpe Diem pieces to disposed of readily. For this reason, they may, for some individuals, slow the cyclicality of consumption. On these grounds, they may even be understood as objects of 'anti-consumption'. Broadly speaking, however, Carpe Diem does not represent a radical alternative to the systems of fashion and consumption. On the contrary, the label is consistent with the most advanced and the most competitive forms of consumption. Moreover, an examination of the label in fact shows up those persistent and very real class distinctions which are otherwise obscured by the logic of fashion.

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Endnote

[1] Because of its maker's reticence, little documentation of or commentary about Carpe Diem exists in the press. Accordingly, I have drawn a number of empirical snippets from an archived discussion thread regarding Carpe Diem on the online discussion forum *The Fashion Spot*. I should point out, however, that my use of this source is not motivated purely by necessity, since this forum provides a most valuable insight into the opinions and motivations of some of the label's consumers.