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Fashion and Narrative: How the Clothed Self Makes Sense of Time

A number of recent writers have suggested that the fashion industry, a commercial entity established to design and distribute clothing, has contributed to the particular kind of despair and cultural malaise that pervades this moment in history. Indeed, when chasing after the "newest" and "most fashionable" commodity, in an effort to create a self – through a lifestyle – individuals seem to be grasping after the wind, catching only images that have no lasting meaning. However, I'd like to propose a different, and more hopeful, perspective on such questions as: Is a fashionable life achieved at the price of a meaningful one? I argue that it is explicitly through experimenting with fashion, specifically fashion trends, that an individual may experience a kind of harmonious unity of mind and body and come to a better understanding of his/herself as uniquely and temporally situated in the world.

Some of the perceived problems with the fashion industry have to do with the fact that fashionable trends are transitory and constantly changing. A few writers have argued that it is impossible to be a true individual when following trends. But perhaps this is not the case. By comparing the fashionable, trend-following individual to the larger notion of the self constructed as a narrative, I think it may become clear that a person can be both an individual and follower of fashion.

Lars Svendsen, in particular, claims that the endless quest for a “fashionable” identity is especially revelatory of the emptiness of the contemporary sense of self. For him, the post-modern individual is “narrative-less” and “context-less,” ultimately illustrating the shallowness of contemporary society. It seems, however, that in making an analogy to language, and the way a self is created socially and temporally through narrative, we may see how trends dictated by the fashion industry actually constitute the very language of clothing (which is essentially a language of the body), and that having a complete sense of self must include an ability to communicate within those proscribed norms. So fashion, then, is not just “clothes,” but rather a clear, concise, measured syntax of clothing. By making the comparison to the narrative self, I believe we may see a theory of fashion begin to emerge that will help shed light on the essential value of fashion and the fashion industry, as an aspect of society and culture that not only does not detract from the goals of individualism, but actually provides explicit tools that allow a person to come to a greater harmony and understanding of the self. Specifically, I would like to argue that both narrative and fashion trends provide frameworks for communicating the self. In narrative we are communicating the story of the self, and through employing trends and dress we illustrate and costume our character. This is a very significant way in which fashion adds to one’s sense of self and overall well-being.

Initially, it will be important to explain exactly what I mean by “fashion” and a “fashioned person.” In a general sense, what I mean by a fashioned person is any human being who dresses or clothes his or her body in a way that they choose. They are thereby “fashioning” their body and “fashioning” their person. But for the sake of this particular

investigation, I'd like to limit our understanding of fashion to the commercial fashion industry specifically. In this sense, it is necessary to understand a "fashion person" as one who follows or imitates specific styles and trends as dictated by seasonal runway shows and related publications. These individuals find themselves focused on certain ways that they may dress to remain "in style" or "in vogue" and be considered by others as someone who is "fashionable." Yet they also make attempts to express their unique ability to interpret trends and styles for themselves. Indeed, the specific ways in which this fashionable-ness is manifested varies between nations and regions, but I am primarily referencing those particular fashions that come out of Paris and New York (and perhaps also Milan and London) and the way these styles filter down to the average consumer.

First, I'd like to specifically examine the work of Lars Svendsen, whose recent book *Fashion: A Philosophy* attempts to dismiss the pursuit of fashion as frivolous and transitory. Svendsen's argument against fashion is very involved and comprehensive, so I'd like to limit my scope by dealing with just one aspect of his criticisms. Svendsen argues that a "fashioned person" is detached from the past and the future, due to the very nature of fashion itself. Fashion is grounded in the "new" and the present; therefore, it is always in a precarious relationship with the past and the future. Through addressing a few of Svendsen's particular concerns, as representative of other possible detractors, I believe we can further make the case for fashion as a serious and relevant aspect of a life well-lived, thereby solidifying a foundation for understanding fashion, and perhaps even the following of trends, as a component of the good life.

Although in *Fashion: A Philosophy* Svendsen acknowledges that the subject of fashion is serious and worth scholarly consideration, in the end he dismisses fashion as explicitly superficial. Throughout the book, he argues that fashion expresses a person's individuality, yet the individuality that is ultimately expressed is empty. He accepts that clothing is "a vital part of the social construction of the self," "expressing one's individuality" and "the formulation of identity." (Svendsen, 2006: 19) But yet, he sees the self that evolves out of fashion as transitory and fleeting. Svendsen argues that by our processes of consumption, we literally buy a lifestyle through the tangible objects that reflect how we want to be. However, these objects (clothing particularly), and the brands they represent, begin to dominate us, resulting in our consumption of those symbols rather than meaningful items they represent.

Svendsen draws particular attention to the idea of self as a narrative. He primarily references Paul Ricoeur's notion of narrative, which states that "to be a self is to give an account of a self through a narrative of who one has been, who one will become and who one is now. To tell this narrative of oneself is to become oneself." (Svendsen, 2006: 149) Yet, Svendsen sees such a narrative construction as exclusive of fashion. For him, the fashioned self works in direct contradiction to this. Because fashion is based in the new and the present, the future is arbitrary; so the temporal narrative structure doesn't fit. He sees the fashioned self as displaying an inherent lack of unity – a unity that is necessary for a complete conception of self. "To establish a self calls for

maintaining a connection: who one has been and who one is to become,” he writes.
(Svendsen, 2006: 146)

Because there is no explicit relation between all the “new” images that constantly replace each other in the cycle of fashion, there is no unity or explicit goal. The self then exists “without a cohesive narrative,” Svendsen writes. “The fashion self is not only a self without a real past, because this past is always forgotten in favour of a present, it is also a self without a future, since this future is completely random. Fashion does not have any final goal – it is not going anywhere except forwards.” (Svendsen, 2006: 149)

For Svendsen, this endless quest for “fashionable” identity reveals how utterly shallow the contemporary sense of self really is. He sees the self that develops in this contemporary sense as “narrative-less” and “context-less.” He concludes that fashion reveals truths to us about our lives and our society, “but what truths are these? That we cultivate surfaces, that we live in an increasingly fictionalized reality, that the constancy of our identities is steadily declining.” (Svendsen, 2006: 157) Paradoxically, for him, the pursuit of identity has led to the dissolution of identity.

In my estimation, Svendsen does not want to accept the necessary givens of a narrative self. He wants there to exist some kind of “unity” or some kind of clear teleological sense to the self, but what he doesn’t see is that the narrative itself is the unity. Why does living in the moment presuppose such a lack of perspective for Svendsen? While he so clearly wants to argue that the “new” images of fashion replace each other without

any cohesion, he does not recognize that the events in our own lives can sometimes seem to occur in an arbitrary and nonsensical way. It is up to us to bestow meaning on those seemingly random events, through the creation, and telling, of our personal narratives.

One reason that a comparison to self-narrative is particularly relevant is that the narrative notion of the self is the latest in a long legacy of philosophical efforts to define selfhood. Beginning with Descartes and his attempt to situate the self in the mind alone, the struggle to make sense of the self as either mind or body has troubled those interested in questions of personal identity. However, the idea of the narrative self represents the most contemporary understanding of self and personal identity as it encompasses some of the most significant aspects of how we understand a self to operate, blending both mind and body. Namely, a self is constructed through action, unfolding in time, against a backdrop of social interaction. This social interaction manifests itself in several important ways, but most significantly, the social milieu in which a self operates determines the language the narrator must use. There are certain norms and/or social cues that serve as givens, even as an individual attempts to construct, or write, his/her own narrative. Additionally, the social background brings in the notion of performance and audience to the unfolding action of the self-narrative. The action is only meaningful in interaction with others. (This performative aspect of the self has prompted some theorists such as Erving Goffman to write that the self is always performing, always aware of its audience.) But however we look at it, it is true that the

action of the self-narrative unfolds something like the script of a play where the individual is the star.

In *Narrative and the Self*, Anthony Paul Kerby gives an explanation of the notion of a narrative self, beginning with the premise that language is the most formative aspect of reality and that converting experience into language is the only way we may be able to make sense of our lives. Storytelling then, or the formation of narrative, becomes the only way that one may overlay meaning onto otherwise incoherent and senseless series of actions. In this process of narration, our individual histories are given meaning. Not only do our histories become meaningful as part of the self-narrative, but our lives then become a sort of narrative project, extending out towards the future. For the French phenomenologist Henri Bergson, the present only makes sense in reference to the future. “That which I call my present is my attitude with regard to the immediate future; it is my impending action,” Bergson writes. (Bergson, 1988: 140) The present is always looking to the future as the self creates itself as a project.

But what exactly does it mean to live in the present or to be “present”? In the individual, it means existing in the moment, in some unity of past and future, mind and body. It is embodiment itself that grounds us in the past. Our bodies are the record of our past: they demonstrate our age, our scars, our experiences. Yet it is the mental component of the self that plans ahead – sees the self as a project looking to the future. Within this idea of the narrative of the self is the understanding that the narrative will continue. As the story is being written, the future is always taken into consideration – this is only a

natural aspect of plot development. In this way, we can understand the self as a “project.” But to create the self as a project in this sense, one must encounter the issue of choice. It is at this juncture that I believe fashion comes to play one of its most important roles in adding meaning to life. And this is an aspect of living as a fashionable individual that Lars Svendsen completely overlooks. It is precisely in the moment of choice that the futureness of the self is exhibited most clearly. It is ultimately choice that defines the self as a project. And everyday choices particularly manifest that future-oriented, project understanding of the self.

Fashion, almost by definition, hinges on the idea of choice. Perhaps following trends, or being in fashion, is just one way to make sense of the multitude of choices that surround us. The fashion industry represents (and informs us of) the social norms, codes, semantics, syntax, and vocabulary of clothing through trends. Therefore, if we want to master that language, that is, the language of the body and the dressing of it, we must learn what the “words” mean. And we must follow the shifting standards as the rules are re-written each season. But somewhere in the midst of that, an individual makes a choice to dress a certain way, to adopt one trend or another, and to stand along with a social norm, yet still be identified as an individual. (Because to stand outside of the fashion industry is not to speak with the proper vocabulary, or in other words to speak nonsense.)

The kinds of choices that are enacted when one dresses “in fashion” are comparable to the construction of the self-narrative. Judith Butler in particular writes that the personal

narrative is always an act of self-creation, yet, the self narrative is bound up with issues of social norms and codes. As we begin to give an account of our self, it is always in a language we didn't choose, with a vocabulary we didn't create. There are certain pre-existing social norms that our narrative fits into, which means that the self is not created ex nihilo. We are forever caught up in a struggle with norms.

Just as one creates a narrative using language one didn't choose, involving social norms and patterns one didn't determine, to make a fashionable choice is to dress within certain existing codified structures. A person "in fashion" does not create his/herself completely at random; there are certain norms of style that pre-exist the individual. Those are specifically the dictates of the fashion industry. All the given trends or styles of a particular season are the "norms" that a fashion person has to work within. But within those norms, they must determine how to express themselves with uniqueness. When the language is mastered, then the utterances have meaning, instead of just being strange sounds – like someone suddenly speaking English in a room full of Chinese speakers. Learning to navigate this pre-existing (although frequently changing) terrain is the true challenge for the fashionably inclined individual.

Fashion has become an area in which we may literally invent ourselves. If a narrative theory of the self is to be accepted, then it only makes sense that the physical aspects of fashion are the appropriate accompaniment to the invention of the self (as we become characters in our own narrative). But how, then, does a "fashioned self" really unfold over time? Walter Benjamin writes in *The Arcades Project* that "the unique self-

construction of the newest, in the medium of what has been, makes for the true dialectical theatre of fashion.” (Benjamin, 1999: 64) When we dress ourselves, either with a concern for trends and styles or not, I argue that these components are always at work: a looking to the future and a reminiscing on the past with a strong foothold in the present. A self exists in time, in dialogue with others, but also in dialogue with time itself. A self exists only as extended over a succession of moments, and as such our expression of ourselves must recognize the historicity of the self. As our self-narrative is an amalgam of different experiences and different memory images, our visible self is a physical re-collection of bits and pieces of our past.

Just in the last few weeks, I have stumbled upon two books that very clearly illustrate how personal narratives relate to fashion in this temporally-situated way: *Autobiography of a Wardrobe* by Elizabeth Kendall and *Target Underwear and a Vera Wang Gown* by Adena Halpern. Not only do these books represent a somewhat clever way to write a memoir, but I believe they demonstrate a feeling that many women and men experience – namely, that the clothing of their lives can serve as signposts for memories – triggers and reminders of certain experiences. The clothing becomes props or literal costumes for life’s unfolding scenes.

The reason this phenomenon may be more apparent (or exaggerated) within the context of the fashion industry in particular is that one can see two layers of meaning and memory at work – while a person is writing the individual story of his/her life, complemented by clothing, he or she is also participating in a larger, communal,

collective act of following and solidifying trends, etc. So now that neon shirt with shoulder pads is not simply the blouse Sally wore on her first date in 1983, but it is also her way of taking part in the fashion of the 80's. Now she can respond along with the rest of the women of her age group: "Wow. Can you believe we wore that?!"

In this sense, trends give individuals the raw material, the vocabulary, to take and begin to craft different references, related to his/her own histories. In the same way that we place meaning on the events of our lives by situating them within the narrative structure, each person places meaning and value onto a trendy aspect of fashion by subsuming it under his/her own sense of style. As individuals, we "tell" fashion, we "speak" the trends. So on a personal level, it is not just that I am another woman wearing a scarf with skulls on it, but that I am wearing this scarf, within the context of my own life.

Although my primary concern is how individuals make sense of fashion and how fashion contributes to one's personal sense of well-being, I'd like to take a moment to address some aspects of fashion design as well. The collections that ultimately make their way down the runway also present a sort of narrative. Designers do not just create a collection out of thin air, but they must work within certain proscribed boundaries, namely, the limitations of the human body, acceptable (or workable) kinds of fabric, and perhaps, if they are to uphold some kind of brand continuity, the previous collection history of their design house. So this narrative element is at work in fashion from the very top, down to the typical consumer. Additionally, we can see throughout recent history the use of "recycled" fashion, both on the runway and on the street,

demonstrating the fashion industry's own comment on temporality. By playing with, and recreating, the past, industry designers illustrate their awareness of the ephemerality of fashion. Yet they are also demonstrating how connected “contemporary” fashions are to the past. Ultimately, fashion recombines the past, in the present, to make it future-oriented.

To illustrate, I'd like to reference Prada's Fall 2008 collection. In this collection one saw black Victorian lace skirts and dresses paired with shoes that practically re-wrote the idea of futuristic. Here is lace, one of the most classically feminine, and in some ways traditional, fabrics used to construct the clothing, combined with shoes that literally took us stepping into the future. The leather wing-like appendages made a not-so-subtle nod to superheroes or people who could possibly propel themselves with their feet. But the lace still kept the collection grounded in the past, with a hint of the old, the familiar, the truly feminine. One could also think of the cluster “statement necklaces” for Fall 2008 that were often made of a collage of old costume rhinestone necklaces or multi-stranded vintage pearls. Fashion is always taking what already existed, reshaping it, pairing it with something unexpected, and taking it forward into the future. This is how trends continue to intrigue us.

If narrative literally deconstructs the arbitrary actions of the past and reconfigures them into a meaningful narrative, fashion (trends) likewise deconstructs the stylistic elements of the past and reconstructs them into a meaningful story for the present. In other words, the meaning is exclusively discovered under the light of the present moment,

and the present projects and hopes for the future. Similarly, the material elements involved in any given fashion re-present the past only in reference to the future. In this way, any particular season, and for that matter, any particular designer, reveals a physical link between the past and future.

The rules of fashion are always changing, as Svendsen recognized. But that phenomenon is not strictly limited to the fashion industry. It is just that in the world of fashion, the changes are made concrete and acknowledged as such. Perhaps this is a good thing – the acknowledgement and validation of unavoidable change. It is this element of constant change that most effectively highlights the issue of time. Where Lars Svendsen finds the superficial, fashioned individual detached from self and severed from time, I argue that it is only in connection with dress, aesthetically chosen, in harmony with the body, that we can make sense of time. We can see our self, in all our various manifestations, live in a series of moments; however, each moment of fashion is a remembering of the past, a carrying forward of that memory into the future where it can be understood as every bit “in the now.”

Not everyone should be a devout follower of fashion in order to be a fulfilled individual. This is not what I am advocating. But acknowledging the legitimacy of the fashion system and getting a handle on embodiment and temporality might require at least a small venture into the world of catwalks and big hair. This is a place where the body meets the public gaze, mediated by fabric. And what that fabric does, how it is

constructed, and how it is worn, has everything to do with the way that we might come to know our self, or rather, create our self.

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