

Introductory Note - Discourses about fashion

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This issue of the journal *Communication and Society* is dedicated to fashion and its relationship to our times. The studies collected in this volume reflect several perspectives on the core theme of fashion, which, despite being interrelated, do not cover the numerous issues that are at stake in this scientific field. Only one of the articles does not fall in this core theme. That is the article “The Portuguese cultural identity: from colonialism to postcolonialism: social memories, images and identity representations”, which presents an analysis of the relationship between memory and identity of the Portuguese colonialists in Africa, as they were represented in the Portuguese cinema until the late twentieth century. Conversely, the two book reviews published in this number of the journal *Communication and Society* fit in with the core theme. Kathia Castilho reviews the main ideas of André Carvalhal’s *Fashion imitates life* (2014), and Maria Gabriela Gama presents Michelle Lee’s (2003) *Fashion victim: our love-hate relationship with dressing, shopping and the cost of style*.

Walter Benjamin, in his unfinished work entitled *Paris, Capitale du Siècle XIXe: Le Livre des Passages* suggests some paths to reflect on modernity and its relationship with fashion. In his chapter specifically focused on fashion, he begins by highlighting the dialogue between fashion and the death of Giacomo Leopardi, in his *Operette morali* of 1824: “«Moda: Madama Morte! Madama Morte!»” (1993:88 [B1,4]). Giacomo Leopardi (2010), in his “Dialogue between Fashion and Death”, explores, in a satirical and cruel tone, the power of fashion, as well as its extreme irrationality. And Benjamin’s text emphasises how the momentary, the transient, continues to be a key feature of fashion in our times. This is a fashion that plays with the extremes, that repels what was already seen.

The diversity and plurality in fashion represent a kind of “eternal return”, in which the manifestations of the present, under constant update, seek inspiration from the past. The keen observer is provided with a view that is closer to continuity than to rupture with the past.

This is not intended to challenge the category of the ephemeral, which has directly driven fashion. Fashion is currently undergoing a peculiar moment in history, which is marked by the acceleration of time, by the cult of the ephemeral: it is, as Vinken (2005:42) states ‘the art of the perfect moment, of the sudden and surprising and yet obscurely expected harmonious apparition’. Consequently, as the author argues, “its realization is, at the same time, its destruction. By appearing and giving definitive form to the moment, fashion is almost already part of yesterday” (Vinken, 2005:42).

However, alongside the constant becoming that is associated with fashion, we realise that something fundamental underlies it. Change, after all, is more superficial than substantial. Throughout this process, beneath the ephemeral, the apparent, the fluid, the transient, beauty is emphasised. This is because fashion, too, in the broadest sense, can be included in artistic studies, as one of the ways to uncover the splendour of the truth of

things. Reflecting on fashion implies that it is not focused in one single direction. In this respect, at least three dimensions that are interwoven should be considered: the dimensions of communication, market, and culture.

FROM FAST FASHION TO HAUTE COUTURE

Marked by the cult of the ephemeral, fashion is nowadays transfigured by the fast fashion phenomenon, by the worshipping of trends, and by the introduction of economic groups. There are three luxury conglomerates that dominate the market: the *Kering group*, the *Richemont group* and *LVMH - Moët Hennessy & Louis Vuitton*. As a result of the emergence of new brands, of the rampant increase in the licensing system, and of the status of brand names converted into icons, consolidated brands embody the '(...) quintessence of a consumer society that seems to have finally found the secret of the virtuous circle in which consumption fuels growth' (Semprini, 2006:38). Nothing is produced to last, and product obsolescence ensures the survival of the economic structures. Everything is experienced in the enjoyment of the present, as Perniola (1993: 104) argues: 'The important thing is what always happens here and now, and this generative possibility is implicit in every moment of life.'

It is a time marked by renewal. What leaves a mark is the new, and this enthronement of the present, of the novel, had already been highlighted by Debord in the 1960s. Whereas Adorno sees in Man the inertia inherent to how he absorbs all that cultural industries have on offer and for consumption, as consumption enhancers and agents of dissemination, Debord observes Man subordinated to the logic of the show: 'In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation' (Debord, 1991:9). If, on the one hand, Debord criticises the society of the showbiz, the regression of human action that is realised in ecstasy, in contemplation over action – in which Man shifts from actor to spectator, and in which the society of the showbiz does nothing else but invariably and concomitantly produce passive spectators –, on the other hand, Baudrillard extends the thinking of Debord, to condense it all in simulacra and imaginary.

The *fast-fashion* chains have revolutionized the fashion industry, and this shift implied re-educating the consumers to reject the old and enjoy the new. They changed the 'rules of the game' of the fashion market globally, to focus on low quality and low cost items. At the very basis of the *fast fashion* success is a keen sense for capturing the trends, the competitive prices, the speed with which they reach consumers, and the novelty. They take themselves as not being responsible for trend setting, but of producing what consumers want (Gama: 2012; Cline, 2013; Lee, 2003; Agins, 2010). Another important aspect that is worth noting is that '*fast fashion* can only offer low prices if consumers continue to buy new clothes as soon as they arrive in store' (Cline, 2013: 99).

Once haute couture ceased to be profitable, it started being at the service of a very selected clientele. Being custom-made and tailor-made, it does not appear on the *catwalk*, let alone in shop displays. It is a kind of trophy made available only to a chosen

few. Since the 1980s, there have been substantial changes in the fashion market, i.e. the brands of haute couture shifted from the hands of the designers to those of business groups that were absolutely unrelated to fashion, but which realised that fashion was a profitable business (Agin, 2010; Gama: 2012).

FROM THE CATWALK TO THE STREET

No less important is the phenomenon of urban tribes, which increasingly serve as inspiration. The street is an explosion of colours, styles, a natural, spontaneous, visual display, which daily inebriates us. And, above all, it is increasingly a source of ideas for fashion designers. This is a shift in paradigm: whereas in the past the haute couture brands were the ones that commanded fashion, nowadays there are other aspects that determine what will be seen in subsequent catwalks: Harajuku has become, for example, an inevitable destination.

The term trend has never been more in fashion than it is nowadays. That is, the trends are no longer restricted to the world of fashion, to be disseminated throughout the whole market. In this respect, no company dismisses trend agencies. Their aim consists of following up any information or 'small movements', 'catching' the *zeitgeist* of what may become a trend, and which will determine what shall be seen on the catwalks. Additionally, the consumer is increasingly an author, i.e. his/her role shifts from that of passive consumer to leading actor, deciding what s/he will consume. S/he is an actor who rejects ordinary consumption in favour of an increasingly creative experience (Kawamura, 2004; Svendsen, 2006; Agin, 2010; Kawamura, 2012; Morace, 2012).

THE BRAND SEX-APPEAL

How should we reflect on the role of brands in contemporary times? Its existence is not a recent phenomenon, rather on the contrary. It is closely related to the emergence of the consumer society, in the turn from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. It then underwent an overwhelming development during the 20th century and the early 21st century. Talking about brands nowadays means talking about seductions, affections, and emotions. It equates with talking about safe havens, about utopias. It means talking about an individual, affective and sensory experience that mutually binds us. Brands appear to us as ultimate dreamlike shelters of freedom. The purchase of our favourite brands 'faces us with aspects as intangible as desire, belief and emotion' (Martins, 2005: 54). In our reverie in the consumption sphere, brands come to life; they become holders of a personality and 'irradiate' *sex-appeal*. It all builds upon the intangibility that materialises in fantasy, in emotion, in dream. In short, in the imaginary and the immaterial. It comes to life in face of the tangible aspects of the products (Castilho, Villaça, 2006).

Based on the known antagonism between latent content and manifest content, it can be stated that, in the brand phenomenon, the anthropological question of the meaning of being and human existence also gains salience, as if the human puzzle could be solved by 'the saying that wants to be said'. If brands arouse us, move us and enchant us, then it means that they are not trivial products, but rather icons of human existence.

The fate of the brands, what infinitely big and infinitely small reflects in them, is, after all, confused with or similar to the fate of Man himself, to what he is capable of in the realm of that which is infinitely big and infinitely small.

IN THE MESHES OF CYBERSPACE

Another no less important phenomenon is the displacement of fashion brands to the web. Indeed, cyberspace has become a *shopping mall* where no crowds meet on their way to the shops. The most trendy shops, the most renowned designers, the latest trends, the *must-have* items, the *it bag* of the moment are all online. More than Paris, London, Milan, Tokyo or New York, the Internet has become, par excellence, the biggest fashion capital, a 'reality that escapes the real space of our usual geography, to re-emerge in real time of sending/receiving interactive signs' (Virilio, 2000: 96). In this respect, Moisés de Lemos Martins argues: 'Through the technology of the virtual, presence and absence, near and distant, heavy and light, appearance and reality are blended. The boundaries between the real and the virtual enter a crisis' (Martins, 2005: 55).

Fashion blogs, which shifted from simple diaries and pure views of the self to actual platforms for redefining taste, have become indispensable partners of fashion brands, as the latter realised the potential thereof. Innocuously, fashion bloggers, who were not attached to any fashion company or economic group, but instead only witnessed a fondness for it, started 'gaining' shape. Nowadays, brands thus subvert two principles that were at the basis of their origin, either via the lack of advertisers, or by their non-subordination thereto. Furthermore, blogs serve as a means of research that provides brands with a variety of data for analysing a culture or a tribe. Indeed, we currently witness a new domain of creation that opens up for fashion, either via the participation in blogs or social media; or via live broadcasts, online sales, and the proliferation of websites, whose record number of visits attest to the emergence of a new market of endless possibilities. Cline (2013: 104) highlights that: 'Nowadays, any (...) celebrity, (...) fashion designer or blogger can influence the winds of fashion through worldwide coverage 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.' To Meffesoli (2000:188-189), the 'imaginary, the wonder, the desire for communion, (...) the proxemics (...) of everyday life are provided, by the Internet and cyberculture, in general, with particularly performative vectors.' Moisés de Lemos Martins, however, nuances this view, noting that 'technology possesses the characteristics of a euphoric stabiliser: technology is the instrument that re-enchants the world' (Martins, 2005: 168). At the same time, nothing about it is challenged. To Moisés de Lemos Martins, the forms that are dominant in our times are the 'tragic, baroque and grotesque forms. These three forms are figures that are antagonistic to the idea of aggregation of existence, (...) they are figures antagonistic to their idea of perfection and harmony' (Martins, 2013: 116). According to this author, 'the tragic, the baroque and the grotesque are dynamics and share similar features: in all of them, life and the world, though quivering, are unstable, ambivalent, meandering, fragmented, imperfect and ephemeral' (Martins, 2013: 117).

IN THE INSIDE OUT OF FASHION

Beyond the glamour, there is a grim reality that transforms the products into brands, and brands into lifestyles, concepts and dreams. We know that the third world has always existed, for the benefit of the first world. We know that the displacement to peripheral countries, the exploitation of child labour, the lack of protection for workers, the absence of fair wages, are all real. Behind the glamour with which fashion shows itself, there is a hazy reality.

Therefore, new conceptions have to be devised around fashion that are directly related to social responsibility and sustainable development, combining fashion and the fight against child labour, the protest against inhumane working conditions, and the claim for distributive policies, based on fair wages. This reversion builds upon the voluntary commitment that companies make on three aspects – economic, environmental and social –, integrating them into the range of corporate concerns, from an holistic perspective (Morin, 1994; Brown, 2012; Dickson, Eckman, 2009).

Luc Ferry underlines that: 'it is no longer Man, who is placed at the centre of the world, that must primarily protect himself, but instead it is the cosmos as such that must be guarded against men. The ecosystem or 'biosphere' is endowed with an intrinsic value far superior to that of this species – this generally quite destructive species that is the human race.' (1993: 25).

All foreseeable, or not yet foreseen, consequences raise a question at the same time simple and complex, that may be phrased in these terms: what kind of earth and what kind of human being will future generations inherit from us? The environment has a sure place in the great journey with which Man is faced. As Soromenho-Marques (1999:55) argues: 'We are, perhaps, the first generation that does not know how their children will live. We foresee that the question, for future generations, is no longer restricted to the dichotomy war/peace, the good or the bad years for agriculture. We foresee a deeper issue.'

IN THE TRIUMPHANT BODY OF FASHION

The idea of 'body' seems inseparable from the scheme of the 'heavy' dualistic anthropology, which reifies the idea of Man as composed of two substances, traditionally called 'body' and 'soul', 'matter' and 'spirit', 'mind' and 'body'. The reason why the anthropological reality of the 'body' in contemporary cultural galaxy is mentioned is that the view of that reality is neither single-sided, nor timeless, rather on the contrary; it is polysemic, plural and mutable. To Moisés de Lemos Martins, 'our current situation stems, to a large extent, from the fact that technique invaded history and the bodies, to the point of there even being a fusion of techné and bíos; hence the conversion of existence into sensitive experience' (Martins, 2013: 116). The evolution of technoscience leads us into questioning 'the weakness of the boundaries between nature and culture, the biological and the technological, the organic and the inorganic, the material and the immaterial' (Gama, 2010: 3).

Fashion has a body; currently, the body that prevails is the perfect body, which departs from the real body. Before the advertisements, it can be seen how a hegemonic

representation prevails in the fashion body. Despite the multiplicity of styles, there is only one body in fashion. The quest for perfection rejects all inaction. This is an arduous discovery of the possibilities of the body, which is viewed as the space of all places and non-places. The proliferation of cosmetic surgery demonstrates the social value of the body, an identity that is constructed from the body. Identity tags are loaned to the skin, internally and externally, through bodybuilding, piercings and tattoos, stretching, cutting, branding and burning. These practices have become ways to build a sense of us, to produce an identity as a means to get closer to an image considered more favourable. They thus reflect, in their use, a willingness to change permanently the intimate and above all social definition of ourselves. The body is at the epicentre of all fictions, challenges and concerns. It is essential to administer one's own body as if administering other assets, from which the body differs less and less. Moisés de Lemos Martins (2006: 67-68) emphasises that the relationship between the flesh and the technique is nowadays 'a warlike obsession'. The body has become the prosthesis of a self that is perpetually in search of a temporary incarnation, in order to secure a significant clue of itself. This means adhering to a fatuous identity, yet relevant for the self. To Kathia Castilho, 'body plastics is nowadays obsessively reworked, so that its biological structure, which displays elements of symbolic signification, is reformatted' (Castilho, 2005: 106).

THINKING FASHION

Ambrogia Cereda critically reflects on the importance of the body in contemporary society. She addresses the 'role' of body alterations as part of a sort of paradigm, a *lingua franca* that is in fashion, and, simultaneously, as an anchor in the relationship with the other. As a result of the analysis of the data that she collected, and which is part of her empirical research, the author describes the body according to four main features: 'the *screen* body (...), the monumental body, the differed body, and the consumable body.' The author points out that there is a common ground underlying the various sources that is related to the desired beauty of the body, and which appropriates it as one of the most desirable objects of enjoyment. These apparently neutral practices are not neutral at all; they are tolerated, and even encouraged, given its contribution to the maintenance of the established social order. The strong reach of this order, in space and in time, does not result from its truthfulness, but rather from its social effect – which is never challenged because it is already taken as part of the 'natural' reality. An additional feature emerged from the research participants' feedback. This is not so much an application whatsoever dictated by fashion, as a common sentiment, disseminated by all of them. This is what the author calls a 'convivial body', which refers to an identity that is more a result of personal introspection, than of operative communication. Also, according to Ambrogia Cereda, a view emerges in the interviews that the stronger emphasis of the 'convivial body' is that of the personal responsibility, which is only made possible by 'a more conscious relationship with the body.'

António Machuco Rosa subsequently reflects on the democratisation of fashion from Worth to Lagerfeld, as an attempt to draw a perspective of how fashion democratised

itself. It is commonly known that the 1950s were the last great decade of haute couture, since there have never been as many independent fashion designers with a global influence in the fashion world. The creations of prêt-à-porter embodied the spirit of fashion, a democratisation that was enabled by the homogeneous system resulting from industrial production, with different prices, styles and novelties. The author takes as one of the subjects of his study the sociologist Veblen's thinking about fashion. On the one hand, he recognises Veblen's insight in realising how the shift in fashion operated. But, on the other hand, he observes the limitations of this theory, as it builds upon the existence of an overly hierarchical society, structured into well-defined classes. According to the author of this study, it can be said that these are post-Veblen times because fashion is no longer characterised by a vertical process; its democratisation led to a process horizontalisation, whereby fashion became affordable to all social strata. Although Thorstein Veblen had made an important contribution to understanding fashion, of which his concept of 'artificiality' is perhaps the most paradigmatic example, it was Georg Simmel who gave a significant step forward in the quest for a general theory of fashion, by proposing, in particular, a new concept – the concept of 'imitation' – as the aspect that contributes the most to the adoption of fashion and fashion shifts. As the author emphasises, it was Georg Simmel who allowed us to step away from that dimension of verticality.

The focus then shifts on to fashion magazines. Brian Moeran persuasively discusses how these magazines, benefiting from a credibility capital, contribute to consolidating the brands. They are, quintessentially, the carriers of the advertising market, which requires both ensuring loyal readers and 'grabbing' the advertisers. In his debate on the cultural values of clothing – and following the opposite direction of Barthes' – Brian Moeran argues for the concept of the term 'discourse of taste' to mean that the 'aesthetic' guidelines of taste and the language of fashion are directly related. According to his study, there are key concepts that, not only constitute the discourse of fashion, but also mutually interact with each of these particular concepts. These keywords and their corresponding concepts, which are typical of the discourse of fashion, promote a kind of 'initiation'. This is because, when people of the fashion world use these words, they show, not only their sense of belonging to the field, but also their specificity and individual stance before people from outside the area. Notwithstanding, the author argues that this language of fashion supposedly standardises and acquiesces a delusional belief, as a result of personal idiosyncrasies, cultural differences and temporal limitations. It is, however, undeniable that the existence of a set of vocabulary typical of the fashion world, with the support of the magazines, managed to create a language, on a global scale, that can cater for consumption.

In turn, Madalena Oliveira builds upon a quote by Eça de Queirós, extracted from Unpublished Letters of Fradique Mendes, to discuss some aspects of fashion, *sensu lato*. The author starts by framing her study in the context of Eça de Queirós' times (the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century), to then move on to the analysis of the phenomenon of fashion in general. Some key concepts that form part of that process are presented: man, woman, purchase, drive, attributes, fashion, mood, body,

clothing, function, urban life, and decoration. Certain benchmark ideas can also be found in Madalena Oliveira's study. The first one is the claim that clothing has nothing neutral. Then, citing Alison Lurie, she elaborates on the idea that 'clothing has vocabulary and grammar that are equivalent to the vocabulary and grammar of verbal language.' It is also made clear that fashion, as a broad-spectrum phenomenon (economic, artistic, anthropological and social), is a system that transforms the insignificant into the significant. Finally, the author focuses on the process of democratisation of fashion, whereby the latter shifted from a class privilege to the field of collective accessibility.

Subsequently, Mara Rubia Sant'Anna and Káritza Bernardo Macedo discuss the presence of Carmen Miranda in our imagery, as well as in the imagery of Brazil. The predominance of Carmen Miranda in music, in fashion and in Hollywood films makes her an icon of Latin America, siding people, according to the authors, like 'Che Guevara, Eva Perón and Salma Hayek.' The study was based on an audio-visual context that took into account the costumes, the sets and the performances used, like a cinematic narrative. Carmen Miranda had a fleeting, yet intense career, having achieved an unprecedented level of international projection and influence in the art industry. Between the 1930s and the 1950s, she lived her life in Brazil, Argentina, the United States and Europe. Nowadays, as in the past, Carmen Miranda is 'seen' across borders as a precursor of Tropicalism, and her image will always be attached to the accessories that she wore around her neck, and the turbans with tropical fruits and 'artificial' flowers that she wore on her hair.

Maria Gabriela Gama then discusses fashion and consumption, and their evolution over time, in an attempt to highlight that consumption is not a recent phenomenon. To the author, the techno-scientific revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Enlightenment revolution of the eighteenth century and the industrial revolution, with its utmost expression in the nineteenth century, dictated a great acceleration of time. The author focuses on the changes of the city of Paris operated by Haussmann, and their implications on the emergence of department stores such as *Le Bon Marché*, *Printemps*, *La Samaritaine*, and the *Galleries La Fayette*, which are marked by impersonality, and on how this contributed to the demise of small businesses. The focus of her reflection then shifts to the emergence of *shopping malls* in Europe, which cannot be detached from the influence of department stores in Paris and London in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In this respect, the author stressed the shopping mall-driven culture: a megapolis where wellness, functionality and leisure are combined, where everything is properly synchronised; a space quintessentially aseptic, artificial, and perfect. The author also approaches the fast fashion phenomenon, and refers to the revolution that it operated in the fashion market, especially by introducing the cult of the new and the concept of disposability.

Mônica Moura and Mariana Dias then approach the topic of how social responsibility and sustainability should be equated. The authors attempt to focus their reflection on the relationship between fashion and sustainability in an accelerated era, such as the one in which we currently live. They devote their research to the cult of novelty, the cult of the ephemeral, the planned obsolescence, thereby reflecting on sustainability,

and debating the discursive and imagery practices of companies that demonstrate being socially responsible. The authors investigate a number of issues that revolve around sustainable fashion, focusing their case study on the jeanswear segment. They build upon the premise that sustainability is a task for all of us, and that sustainable fashion should be thought, not in terms of lightness, but in terms of a consistent, clear and effective stake, in which we are all invited to participate. ✍

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