

Fashion – Between Evolution and Mutation

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Abstract. *This essay aims to look at how the phenomenon of contemporary fashion has evolved under the influence of technology and under the pressure of cost effectiveness; the essay will also be analyzing the courses of development that fashion has taken, as well as the occurrence of mutations throughout the logic of contemporary fashion. It is equally important to follow up on the impact that these transformations occurring throughout the universe of fashion may have in the contemporary society.*

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This essay aims to look at how the phenomenon of contemporary fashion has evolved under the influence of technology and under the pressure of cost effectiveness; the essay will also be analyzing the courses of development that fashion has taken, as well as the occurrence of mutations throughout the logic of contemporary fashion. It is equally important to follow up on the impact that these transformations occurring throughout the universe of fashion may have in the contemporary society.

In conceptual terms, we need to define the fact that in the 21st century fashion no longer refers to clothing trends and accessories, but to any sort of production of goods and services that have a business or cultural value.

Nowadays, fashion is so important socially and economically that no other representative area of the human society, as we know it today, is able to exist without

the distinctive footprint of this phenomenon. The influence of the fashion phenomenon is so wide that it can actually mislead an uninformed or absent-minded viewer of the daily spectacle, who could live under the impression that there are still segments of the productive, economic, cultural society which have remained unaffected by the evolution of the fashion phenomenon, but that is just an illusion. In reality, nowadays fashion sets the tone in almost any area of activity.

The fashion phenomenon is now influencing in a decisive manner not only the electronic industry, but equally the textile industry or the automotive industry, and why not the movie and musical productions, as well as the best tourist destinations of the day or the curriculum of higher education institutions to begin with.

In order to define this topic theoretically, I am bringing up here the clarifying demonstration proposed by the Belgian designer Dirk Bikkembergs for the different meanings of "mutation" and "evolution" in the fashion industry: "Evolution is always positive, mutation may not be! Because we have always believed that evolution is a "natural phenomenon" and that mutation is a form of "self-change". The positive/negative sign changes periodically depending on the way in which the social reality influences individual changes." (Alfano Miglietti 2005, 234).

Moreover, in this essay, I will attempt to outline some of the possible elements that characterize the evolution or mutation, that can be identified through the logic of contemporary fashion, from my point of view, and that can implicitly have the effects generated at social level as part of these paths that the transformation of fashion is taking.

It is natural to wonder to what extent fashion is capable of influencing social evolution and why following the play or balance of the internal evolution-mutation of the current fashion universe is useful.

For example, one moment in the evolution of the fashion phenomenon that plays a major role in the development of the fashion industry was the production of the first sewing machine (1755); the machine was developed along the years up to 1850 when the sewing machine as we know it today started to be produced and distributed worldwide (Baldini 2005, 13).

Technological evolution has been the main element that generated the appearance of diversified production, advertising and implicitly the phenomenon of fashion. Nowadays, under the pressure imposed by the fashion-advertising binomial, technology is obliged to identify new quick production solutions in order to satisfy the needs and expectations of the consumers. This is how the needs of consumption and technological innovation are marked in an obvious manner by the existence of the evolution of the current fashion, by imposing the internal logic of this universe based on quick and permanent renewal. Could the speed of consumption and renewal that are imposed by the logic of fashion and are accelerated year after year represent a form of mutation in the universe of fashion, also gener-

ating visible effects such as the depletion of natural resources and the alternation of the environment?

Getting back to the issue, a first response to the above question, more specifically to what extent can fashion influence social evolution, could be the one offered by the writer Ann-Mari Sellerberg, who said that: "At a time where fashion prevails, the present holds a significant value to individuals and the value of the traditions, the past and the ethnic affiliation slide to the secondary plan." (Sellerberg 2005, 35)

In my conversations with young people, I have noticed that they explain their unawareness of past events by saying that they were not born at the time when this or that event happened; well, I personally construe such statement as a hyperbolisation of the present as an effect of the impact of cultural fashions and technologies upon society as a whole.

This is how the mere valorization of the fashion phenomenon which is now under the influence of factors such as promotion, consumption, globalization, excessive media coverage may lead to rebuilding a certain type of culture which is based on idealizing the present that repositions individuals or the society at large by reference to their origins.

From my point of view, even this form of exclusive and degenerative experience of the present may account for as a type of mutation induced by fashion and the consumption of the services and technologies that are associated to the online universe. For example, nowadays we are witnessing debates about the association of the selfie phenomenon with potentially psychological affections (*borderline selfitis*).

In my book titled in Romanian *Semiotica Modei. Mutații de gen în moda contemporană*, I was looking at another elements that may be identified as a result of the effects of the dual play of evolution/mutation of fashion upon contemporary societies, more specifically the masculinisation of the feminine fashion, as follows: "[...] the masculinisation of women fashion is a massive phenomenon, while the feminisation of men's fashion phenomenon may be identified only in isolation, even if nowadays, during the contemporary period, the chromatics of the masculine fashion includes hues and nuances that would have traditionally reflected a typically feminine couture." (Podaru 2013, 21)

Following closely the evolution of the fashion phenomenon, from its appearance in the mid-19th century, we can note the "fashion of the 100 years", as it is defined by Gilles Lipovetsky, when fashion trends were established in Paris. After WWII and once the new technologies discovered in various production areas started to be used, fashion started evolving again, and Fred Davis described it so accurately. This is what he said: "Classically, before fashion became as polymorphous and pluralistic as it has in recent decades, it was at this stage that those not displaying the fashion would become conspicuous in their failure to do so" (Davis 1992, 155).

At the end of the day, developing and multiplying the spheres of influence at the level of fashion may only represent a step forward in defining the new fashion trends; apart from Paris, other fashion capitals have appeared too: New York, Milan, London, Tokyo, Berlin or Madrid. As far as I am concerned, the “polymorphous” and “pluralist” evolution outlined by Fred Davis after analyzing how fashion had evolved as a phenomenon from 1980 through the 1990s, does nothing but highlight the differentiating nature that would logically underlie the existence of fashion.

Nowadays, even if new fashion capitals have appeared and the economic growth rate of the fashion industry is ever more alert, we are looking at a time when the style proposals that we find internationally become more uniform. This mutation of the fashion can be generated by both the constant globalization trends and the aggressive advertising campaigns promoted by the large retailers (H&M, Zara, Mango, Tommy Hilfiger, etc.) uniformly and concertedly at international level.

Defining this sort of global advertising, author Delia Balaban once wrote that the “growing importance of global advertising is the consequence of the companies’ growing trends, which is due to the saturation of national markets, enhanced competition, and economic internationalization. [...] For some sorts of products, such as the luxury products, clothing or footwear, a clear consumption uniformisation trend can be seen.” (Balaban 2009, 251-252)

This is how, in successive phases, the evolution and mutation elements are intertwined while defining fashion as a phenomenon.

It has to be noted here that some accessories and some materials that were originally used by engineers or the military were adopted in the past, turned into genuine vectors for the fashion industry and accounted for a real evolution in this particular field. For the time being, those elements of the military industry that have been transposed into fashion are not that conspicuous since the avant-garde role of the inventions made in this line of work has been taken over by technology. For example, the attributes of fashion and technology, going hand in hand, have generated the successive appearance of the HD Ready, Full HD or UHD screens. Remaining in the realm of electronics, the example referring to mobile telephony and Internet using the 2G, 3G, 4G successive technologies is also actual.

We are living through times of evolution of the innovations begotten by the fashion industry or ancillary industries and, if in the past the materials used in the military industry were influencing positively the fashion’s becoming and evolution, nowadays fashion (I mean the fashion industry) which has reached its maturity brings forth a number of materials and technologies whereby it also influences other lines of work.

For that matter, I would like to recall what stylist Rebecca Gaddis said (after a dialogue with Rebeccah Pailes-Friedman, a professor at the Pratt Institute in New York): “[...] the future of clothing as we know it is about to change in a big way,

and smart textiles are paving the way for this change [...] Smart textiles are fabrics that have been developed with new technologies that provide added value to the wearer. [...] There are fabrics that help regulate body temperature, reduce wind resistance and control muscle vibration – all of which help improve athletic performance.” (www.forbes.com, 2016)

From my point of view, perhaps the most important mutation which we can identify today in structural terms is the one referring to the online fashion consumption and I do not mean “window shopping”, but actual online shopping. For example, you can buy Domestos White & Shine 24H Plus any way you want, since its properties and usefulness will remain unchanged. On the other hand, in the case of clothing, perfumes, new leatherwear creations (footwear, bags, etc.), the consumer would naturally want to analyze the product directly, to understand the texture of the material, the volume, the size or the smell, since all of these items are actually purchased for their newly-assigned values and for some specific details.

At the end of the day, the practice of buying products that belong to the universe of fashion, and not only, by ordering them on the Internet runs counter the theory that Roland Barthes explained in his book, *The Fashion System*; according to that theory, the fashion item exists under three hypotheses: the real one, the one described in images and the written one (the item described in words). The fashion item that is described or expressed in writing will not present the same reality, since these descriptions are just a derivation of the actual item. (Barthes, 1990: 3-5)

Consequently, switching from buying tangible fashion items to items described in pictures on an Internet page is, to my mind, a form of exacerbating the consumerism, a way of giving up on the idea of quality and finishing, and a victory of the brands and logos to the detriment of the quality, utility and functionality of the materials or the finishing touches and the particular details. We could say that in this way the consumer gets farther away from the natural consumption area, while getting closer to another artificial form of virtual consumption.

Once we cut the corner which fashion writers refer to as “trickle down” (the fashion that the masses take from the elites) and while fashion starts to “bubble up” (this is how theoreticians refer to street fashion inspiring *haute couture*), and also as soon as *hippy* phenomenon settles in and as soon as the sex life becomes more liberal, we are also witnessing the appearance of a social retribalization phenomenon in the world of fashion, a situation that brings forth the idea of the human body as a consumable object. The human body seen as a consumable object is that phenomenon induced by fashion whereby individuals – wishing to stand out and accessorize themselves in ways that have not been seen before – have their bodies tattooed, pierced, exercised, modeled surgically, etc.

For that matter, speaking of body modeling, writer Laura Grünberg once stated that: “interventions upon the human body are associated to a specific collection of symbols whereby an alternative non-verbal communication language is formed,

a sort of stratification and above all a sort of social distinction and even a way of protesting or getting socially separated.” (Grünberg 2011, 394)

The phenomenon of the human body as a consumable object, to my mind, stands proof of both the fact that contemporary fashion has become nowadays the most important social influence factor, making us consume ourselves, and a mutation which is identifiable in the contemporary fashion. Moreover, it is only too natural that we should wonder whether this sort of fashion, the one of accessorizing our own bodies, could not influence – while evolving – the life of individuals that support these trends. Starting from this question, I consider that both the scientific research of this phenomenon and the popularization of the results could represent a current necessity and a time of useful reflection at social level.

I am getting back with the definition of piercing provided by the prestigious *Dizionario della moda* written by Guido Vergani, in which we can read that: “The practice of piercing is one of those body changes defined as technical mutations. Some of these technical mutations involve tattoos, scars and branding [...]. These technical mutations represent the search for personal independence, for one’s time away from the patterns that society proposes and ultimately imposes” (Vergani 2010, 935).

Therefore, we are right in saying that the elements associated to accessorizing one’s own body by means of tattoos, piercing, etc. move away from the world of fashion and from its underlying logic, while getting closer to protest or ideology-based statements, thereby turning - in my mind - into a fashion mutation.

Since we have brought up the ideology of fashion and its transformation into a political support instrument, the same sort of transformation of the current fashions may only represent a deviation from the profound meaning of fashion, more specifically the differentiation and redefinition of fashion in the form of a social leveling tool. Referring to turning fashion into a political instrument, Tim Edwards once said that: “[...] Fashion is, however, now a very political phenomenon. This is due, for the most part, to the various social movements of the 1960s and 1970s that sought to politicize appearance as part of an overall politics of identity.” (Edwards 2012, 154).

I consider that inducing these non-natural trends that can nowadays be noted in the world of fashion may also be a consequence of the fact that the fashion industry has taken up style models that can be identified in the street fashion, thereby diluting the creativity of fashion and invalidating the very authenticity of the models created inside certain subcultures.

Another influential element that could possibly bear a negative impact upon the fashion phenomenon could be inherent in the very advertising that, alongside fashion, for decades on end, has managed to define and to build modernity. Yet nowadays the globalize advertising that has been extended to cover our mobile

phones, subway billboards and screens showcase and promote lifestyles, social patterns and human and clothing typologies.

Referring to advertising and to the values transmitted through it, Vanni Code-luppi stated that: “[...] this is a valuable guidebook for a person’s daily behavior, it plays a key role in the construction of the sexual and social identity and is profoundly involved in individual relationships, inside and outside families.” (Code-luppi 2003, 9).

This essay is food for thought over an important phenomenon that defines today’s human society and that I have been closely watching, while noting the leveling elements and the stagnation that can be seen in the world of fashion as we know it today. Nowadays, after two successive evolutionary phases, fashion - the one that appeared for the obvious purpose of creating social differences even by means of imitation - self-copies itself and imitates street fashion out of the wish of not failing because of economic considerations, while swiftly sliding to the area of mutations.

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