

Is Modest Fashion Modest?

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Abstract

Fashion seems to be opening to a trend towards ethnic and multicultural content, and even to a modest fashion based on the desire to avoid attracting attention. The paper discusses the possibility that fashion has a social impact, contrasting it with Simmel's "abstractness:" the claim that fashion has no reason and cannot have a reason – and if it does, this is not the reason why we follow it. Fashion goes by and this is its real content, beyond the forms it takes over time. The open question is whether a modest fashion can still be modest, or whether it has to give up its nature in order to be fashionable – and whether this is a price that is worth paying.

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What is happening in recent times to fashion — Mallarmé's *déesse des apparences* and the triumph of lightness and fatuity? In a time in which politics is accused of losing its reference to stable values and chasing short-term superficial effects, on the catwalks and in fashion magazines an aesthetic of commitment seems to be emerging, addressing explicitly the great open problems of the present time.

Multiculturalism, for example, has rarely been as highlighted (and as problematic) as today. While migration waves bring other cultures in our homes, conflicts show dramatically how different they are, political correctness is established but also mocked, cultural and ethnic diversity is looked for and feared at the same time. Fashion apparently welcomes this attitude and becomes itself ethnic and multicultural. The catwalks of the last few years celebrate diversity with collections inspired by African, Indian, Japanese style or by the most varied forms of otherness. Moreover, with the label “modest fashion,” fashion also seems to be opening to a trend that is apparently its negation — a Muslim fashion explicitly based on the desire to avoid attracting attention.

What does this trend mean? Does it reflect a new openness of our society or just the cynicism of the fashion system, that absorbs and crushes every content and every motivation? Is fashion becoming a carrier of contents or is this trend itself only a fashionable fashion that will elapse without traces? When the photographer Norbert Baksa portrays a model on the background of a refugee camp in Hungary, is it social commitment or opportunism?

As it is often the case when dealing with fashion, things are more complex than they appear and a careful observation discloses a tangle of (fascinating) paradoxes .

Fashion is accused of being frivolous — and undoubtedly is, but this is precisely its strength. The frivolity of fashion is a very serious thing, the basis of the power of the “queen of appearances.” Georg Simmel called it “abstractness:” fashion has no reason and cannot have a reason — and if it does, this is not the reason why we follow it. Christian Louboutin stiletto heels but also Birkestock sandals can be fashionable; Palestinian keffiyeh but also animalier fabric. If, however, you wear Birkenstocks or a keffiyeh in order to be fashionable, you do not do so because they are comfortable or because of political convictions, and in fact you stop wearing them when fashion changes — to the great irritation of those who instead have a motivation and move in or out of fashion with absolute indifference. You follow fashion if you dress in a certain way knowing that last year you dressed differently and next year you will like different things — and this is exactly what fascinates us. The reason for fashion is not having a reason, and therefore being able to constantly change.

Fashion goes by and this is its real content, beyond the forms it takes over time. We like fashion not because it is beautiful (just think of the absolute lack of grace of many adolescent fads) or because it is useful or interesting or convenient; we like it because it is “in,” and we know it. We follow what is “in” knowing that it will be “out” next season, when something else will be “in.” We do not follow fashion despite its changes — we follow it because it changes, and thereby does not bind us to anything. As Coco Chanel said, fashion is there to go out of fashion. We follow its dictates today knowing that tomorrow we will do differently, thereby preserving our freedom (or thinking to preserve it).

Does this mean that fashion cannot have a social content and cannot be useful or beautiful? Quite the opposite: frivolity allows fashion to refer to each content and to propose what it wants, provided it is new and surprising. Not having a reason means being able to use any reason and making it “in,” since it is not the reason what matters — it is enough that it is different from what was there before, which then gets “out.” Indeed, fashion is incredibly dynamic and inclusive, because continuous change requires many materials that fashion finds everywhere, drawing freely from nostalgia of the past and from futuristic predictions, science or entertainment, commitment or leisure, tradition and deviance.

Fashion has done it since its inception, with an indifference that appeared scandalous in the 17th century. It made aristocratic ladies dress like peasant girls or laundresses, and then imposed the style of woodcutters and sailors, of street gang, athletes, the military or prisoners. Fashion doesn't care where it finds its references and quickly made fashionable even a style like punk, which refused everything and above all fashion. Trends such as a colonial or an oriental style reappear cyclically in fashion trends, that take ad-

vantage of different traditions as sources of inspiration. Distant cultures are periodically rediscovered, explored, reviewed and abandoned, when fashion moves to some other trend.

The great irony of fashion, however, is that, in welcoming everything, it turns it into something different, which sometimes you don't recognize — or not in the same way. Street culture, ethnic reference, protest or search for origins, which have their motivations and reasons, can all get fashionable and become extremely popular — but not for those reasons and on those grounds. This understandably arouses indignation. If punk style or casual wear become fashion, it is not because who follows them shares the protest of punks or is sporty (you can also buy sneakers with high heels, and punk clothing can be very expensive). Fashion is fashionable because it is fashionable — that's it.

So fashion cannot have any social impact? Does fashion, that must be frivolous, have no effect on general sensitivity, on the openness to different cultures or on the tolerance of society for the new?

Those who work in fashion are convinced of the contrary. Franca Sozzani, the recently departed legendary editor of *Vogue Italy*, argued that fashion “is not really about clothes, it's about life” — and therefore must have some affinity with life. It could only be an illusion, but on the other hand it is clear that fashion is not indifferent to contents. Materials and shapes that end up being fashionable are by no means arbitrary. Even if fashion has no reason and always changes, not anything goes, and a successful stylist must have an acute sensitivity to grasp the trends that can be successful. Fashion works if it manages to capture what attracts people's attention — even if they follow it without a reason.

The great fascination of fashion lies in a unique combination of contingency and non-arbitrariness. Contingent is what could be different — like fashion, that was different last year and will be different in a couple months. But nevertheless it is not arbitrary, in the sense that not everything works and the contents must be chosen with care and skill. If the designer makes bad choices, her proposals do not work and her collection can fail, while on the other hand many fashion trends spread by themselves, making dreadlocks or surgeons' plastic slippers “in.”

When fashion works, its contents become familiar and are part of everyone's references, having a heavy impact on society. Fashion, frivolous and disengaged, becomes a powerful social force. If fashion discovers the African style, a western teenager following it does not have to decide deliberately to dress up in the styles and colors of tribal cultures, which he may not even know. He is simply following fashion. Once he has dressed up as the members of an African, or Arab, or Indian culture, however, it is more difficult for him to refuse someone who dresses in that way or wears the same jewels. Fashion accomplishes a strange form of imitation: we follow what others are doing in the search for our identity, for that which makes us different — and at that point the different become like us.

Fashion is accepted without a reason, that's why it spreads and is so powerful. But once it has been accepted, it is a social fact that has consequences. Fashion is transitory and cannot be otherwise, but leaves traces. Should we then describe fashion as a force for social emancipation, the opposite of cynicism and lack of commitment? Can fashion, frivolous and unmotivated, be an instance that welcomes and spreads social diversity?

Once again, we must be careful. Fashion has its rules and its forms. It can accept everything, if it becomes fashionable, but does it in its own way, first of all by imposing its “abstractness:” who follows something because it is fashionable, does not do it for a reason. Accepting this rule can be too high a price to pay, when what really matters is the reason.

Take for example the recent trend of “modest fashion:” a style of loose comfortable dressing that avoids tight-fitting, see-through or provocative clothes and keeps parts of the body like legs, arms and shoulders covered — in accordance with the principles of Muslim religion. Recently many brands are proposing modest fashion collections, both high-end as D & G, Max Mara or DKNY, and big retailers like H & M or Uniqlo, while fashion bloggers suggesting ways to combine modesty with style increase their followers. Hijabi-fashion is discussed as a major emerging trend — not only because of the enormous market potential of Islamic customers.

If this trend is meant to be fashion, however, and aspires to join the global fashion circuit, it has to be more than just the offer of good quality, well-tailored clothes to religiously devout customers. Quality, in itself, is not necessarily fashionable. Following fashion doesn't mean just dressing well according to one's beliefs, but dressing up following a trend and showing that you are following it. Those who follow fashion want to be "in." If modest fashion is fashion, it must also undergo this rule and attract customers that follow it simply because they follow it.

Apparently, this is what is happening when Lady Gaga decides to present herself in public with a hood from Donatella Versace's collection, and Kanye West shows the model Halima Adem wearing a hijab. Muslim believers were certainly not the only target. Modest clothing becomes fashionable when it addresses not only those who, for confessional or moral reasons, cannot or do not wish to dress otherwise, but also those who could dress as they wish but choose this style of clothing rather than an alternative one. Modest style becomes fashion when it becomes contingent and undergoes the law of fashion: it could be otherwise.

The consequence, then, is that it will be otherwise, and this is why it is followed. Modest fashion, like all fashions, counts as fashion if it is transitory and does not have a motive, besides being in fashion — and then you dress like Lady Gaga or according to Tommy Hillfigher's modest collection, as long as they are "in." But is this volubility acceptable to a devout public? Is the motivation of modest fashion, to follow the precepts of the Islamic religion, compatible with the form and rules of fashion: to be indifferent to content? Fashion incorporates everything, even religion and devotion, but according to the law of contingency. Is this law acceptable, when principles are needed?

A clear example of the kind of conflicts that can arise is the basic principle of modest style: the desire to avoid attracting attention. The basic principle of fashion, on the contrary, since the time of the dandies is the desire to attract attention, even at the cost of being unpleasant. The dandy did not want to be liked nor to be proper or elegant, but to surprise. So does fashion, but the continuous search for surprise soon becomes repetitive, and ostentatious normality has already become a refined form of deviance — see Prada as an example. For fashion, therefore, modesty in itself is not an absolute novelty nor is incompatible with its logic — but it must be noted as such, and attract attention. Dressing modestly can be fashionable, but it must be clear that it is not just sloppiness. Fashion can easily take on a modest style, as it already took on chastity as a way to be sexy. The open question is whether a modest fashion can still be modest, or whether it has to give up its nature in order to be fashionable — and whether this is a price that is worth paying.

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