

FASHION STRATEGY A LA MODE

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FASHION AND TRADITION

One of the biggest myths about fashion says that we are doing something unpremeditated and spontaneous when we follow fashion. In reality the typical fashion behavior seems to be just the opposite. The goal of this article is to try to illustrate that this behavior is quite "studied" (Blumer 1973:328).

The basic assumption here is that modern fashion behavior is particular for today and differs in form from previous fashion behavior. The current fashion acts as a successor to tradition, as tradition often needs a replacement today. Traditional dictates are not infrequently problematic for people today, as the rules can be considered too static. In a modern, quickly changing society, people experience a need to concretely express the shifting experiences they have in different ways. One such way of expressing oneself is by changing behavior as rapidly as a fashion shifts.

The edicts of tradition often seem self-evident. We follow them without reflection. We view them as being natural rules for conduct and do not usually feel any need to explain or prove them. We do *not* consider the rules of fashion in the same way. To be sure, they can be felt many times as being as definite in their demands for observance as any tradition. But we note often a clear *distance* to fashion's rules. That is, that we seem to show a conscious disregard for following the rules in the way they were followed before, as well as to "take one socio-psychological step away" from the rules. Simmel's striking description of the specifically modern way of relating to existence gives an idea of what is here meant by "distance" from the fashion rules: ". . . the aesthetic interest of recent times has tended towards an increase in the distance produced by transposing objects into art. I have in mind the tremendous attraction that artistic styles far removed both in time and space have for the artistic sense of our time . . . all these forms, familiar to all the arts, place us at a distance from the substance of things; they speak to us 'as from afar'; reality is touched not with direct confidence but with fingertips that are immediately withdrawn" (Simmel, 1978:4478 orig. 1907).

WAYS TO EMPHASIZE DISTANCE

With the help of different types of fashion strategies, we try to underline that we do *not* follow the rules of fashion instinctively and without thinking, that is, in the same manner that we followed the dictates of tradition.

Our special relationship to fashion appears perhaps more clearly by being placed in contrast to how we perceive tradition.

- Tradition concerns the expected, fashion the unexpected.
- The rules of tradition are obviously close to hand. Those of fashion are "plucked" often from socially distant contexts.
- Tradition requires no proof. Fashion is sometimes connected to an almost scientific argumentation.
- Tradition leaves no room for signs of individual personality. In fashion we stress often how personal our choices are.

The basis for the different *fashion strategies* includes the four contrasts given above. With the help of these, we can definitely claim that we are not traditional in our behavior. Our fashion strategies in which fashion is contrasted to tradition, are presented below.

1) We can indicate distance to the rules by putting unexpected combinations together. 2) Another strategy for indicating distance can be by using rules of taste taken from far away. 3) Tradition in its self-evidence was its own *raison d'être*. On the other hand, the modern things - "that which is the most healthy," "the most intelligent," "the most rational," — can sometimes require *an almost scientific argumentation*. This can be viewed as a third way of indicating distance in relation to the unquestioned routines of tradition. One emphasizes that the rules are followed "after careful consideration." 4) *The personal element in a choice is emphasized*. Once again this is to indicate the difference between it and the self-evidence of tradition. Elsewhere I have described fashion processes in different areas, such as interior decorating, food and clothes (Sellerberg, 1978, 1979, 1982). The four fashion strategies mentioned above shall now be illustrated with the help of empirical material from these various areas.

USING UNEXPECTED COMBINATIONS

Very different things are combined. An evening gown is worn with tennis shoes. One can show a well-defined distance by thus fooling with the rules. "Hautebo", the combination of Haute Culture with Bohemian, is an example of such "distance-indication." Ladies with private incomes sit about on up-turned cases eating caviar straight from the tin with ivory shoe horns . . . One of these ladies exemplifies what the fashion of the seventies has so far added up to. She owns a Jacobean manor and she carries a plumber's bag. In the inner clique of the wealthy jet-setters, one eats and dresses like the third world: "as well as eating for the third world (aubergines and courgettes), to liaise with the starving masses, we have not taken to wearing things for it" (Vincent 1976 645). Here we see an example of a particularly sophisticated fashion combination - jet-set wealth and the starving masses' diet or clothing. The more unusual the combination, the more defined the disregard for tradition.

USING "FOREIGN" RULES OF TASTE

In the modern ice cream parlors, one can get ice cream cones, pieces of cake served on elegant glass plates, and pie with cream from way back when. The nostalgia created by food here seems to have a special appeal. Anyone who follows a nostalgic fashion can indicate that he is removing himself from his own surroundings and time. In the same way, wearing apparel from a foreign country or "foreign" class can stand out as being especially sophisticated - and consciously studied.

Thus, social distance can take many forms. The socially well-established for example can adopt the styles worn in the world of prostitutes and procurers. For the fashion-conscious youth of Paris, military jackets or "authentic worker overalls" are considered quite chic. The Paris fashion is described in a Swedish garment trade magazine article which says that the avant-garde boutiques in the vicinity of the old Halles sold authentic military jackets in field-green, army-grey tunics made out of thick canvas, and sturdy boots, all in a sort of impoverished anti-milieu, as well as authentic worker overalls in denim complete with pockets and straps for tools (Habit, 1976.13.45).

Diverse socially-foreign dishes can also become the "last word." The important element

here is how far away from us they are, and by this is meant not geographically: "party food from Tanzania" and "gourmet food from the farm" can both indicate this distance. One sign of our interest in the geographically far-away places regarding food is of course the large number of cookbooks available from all the corners of the world. Even in the Swedish "basic cookbook" (*Var kokbok*) are recipes for French, Italian and Chinese dishes, to name a few. Further evidence for the interest in foreign foods is seen in the number of foreign restaurants which have opened in the last few years. Stockholm, for example, has become international in this respect. One can choose French, Greek, Chinese, Mexican, Indonesian, Russian or Spanish cuisine.

The Swedish market places have also become exotic. A journalist in an article in *Expressen* (1981), the country's largest evening newspaper, says that the Swedish market place, Hotorget, is probably the most exotic place in Stockholm. A trip here can easily replace a charter trip to Italy. Anyone can effortlessly soak up international stimulation to his heart's desire: sausages of all kinds, tons of feta cheese and olives, and olive oil by the barrel. You can also purchase beans, peas and lentils in all colors and shapes, mystical spices and chili peppers — even empty-eyed amputated sheep heads.

The peculiar attraction of "things far-away" can also make certain of "food rules" of the 1930's seem particularly up-to-date today. Sunday dinner in the 20's and 30's meant almost without exception the Sunday roast, with accompanying potatoes, gravy and vegetables. The unshakeable hold of tradition can clearly be observed in the descriptions of these Sunday dinners. Today the Sunday roast with all the trimmings once again seems attractive. But the situation for the person of today serves a leg of lamb for Sunday dinner is quite different from that of the 1930's person. Today we *choose* to be traditional. We consciously "pick out" something that is distant in time.

INDICATING DISTANCE WITH PROOFS

Tradition was self-evident; it did not require any proof for its validity. The changing rules of fashion, however, are not infrequently connected with a more or less extensive argumen-

tation. "Proving" the correctness of a certain choice is seen here as the third type of fashion strategy. One indicates with the help of argumentation the break with the "unconsciousness" of tradition.

It is not unusual for a new fashion to be presented as the most current scientific finding in the area. "... the model which emerges with a high sanction and approval is almost believed by them as being intrinsically and demonstrably correct. This belief is fortified by the impressive arguments and arrays of specious facts that may frequently be marshalled on behalf of the model. Consequently, it is not surprising that participants may fail completely to recognize a fashion process in which they are sharing. (Blumer, 1973. 338).

During the first decades of the 20th century, diet vagues flourished, which were called "Fletcherism," "Hauserism," etc. The suffix "-ism" is significant, as it implies that it is a question here of a comprehensive, systematic, developed scientific doctrine. "-ism" implies the "scientific basis" of the theory. Each one of these trends was accompanied by books, and sometimes magazines, in which the theories behind the various diets were presented. With the help of these, the excellence of the different diets could be "proved" (Gardner, 1955.209).

Such an argumentation was illustrated clearly in a study of "The Natural Health Food Movement." Brissett and Lewis completed a full content analysis on a sample of twelve health food manuals and one critical review. They utilized only those volumes that were listed as "Books Not Recommended by the Chicago Nutrition Association. The scientific pretensions are illustrated quite clearly in quotations from these manuals: "Human beings whose diet was improved with additional B vitamins exceeding ordinary requirements showed a marked increase in their resistance to mental stress. They attained a greater degree of steadiness and self-control under pressure, and pantothenic acid proved especially valuable in this connection" (Brissett and Lewis 1978.72).

The authors of these manuals utilize not only personal testimonies, but also evidence drawn from scientific research and a proliferation of case studies (Brissett and Lewis, 1978.68).

Another way of "arguing the case" is by calling the fashion in such a way that its excellence is understood. Thus, what is currently a la mode is simply called "the healthiest," "the most rational," "the most practical," "the most intelligent." All the above are variations of the strategy for indicating distance through "scientific proof," either implied or explicitly mentioned. It is shown that clothing, food, or interiors, were accepted only after long and careful consideration.

PERSONAL CHOICE SHOWS DISTANCE

We often emphasize in fashion that it is a question of "personal" choice. This fourth type of fashion strategy can also be employed to indicate that the routine of tradition is no longer applicable. Here, however, a particularly important characteristic of fashion is touched upon: the combination of personal choice and group conformity. Our most intensive efforts to express ourselves often follow without a doubt the well-trodden paths of fashion. "Fashion furnishes this very combination in the happiest manner, for we have here on the one hand a field of general imitation, the individual floating in the broadest social current, relieved of responsibility for his tastes and his actions, yet on the other hand we have a certain conspicuousness, an emphasis, an individual accentuation of the personality" (Simmel 1957.550).

The emphasis on personal choice particularly concerning home furnishings thus seems to be a usual "distancing strategy." In a Swedish survey a substantial part of those interviewed stressed the great importance of having a personally decorated home. One employs several different methods to indicate this personal touch (Sellerberg 1979, 94). One such personalizing strategy is to emphasize decorating with "living materials." Materials such as cork, wood, marble, and grass-cloth wall paper, through their grain, texture or marblizing. "Nature's own patterns" give a personal touch to the furnishings, one thought. Why then are certain things viewed as "dead" and others as "living"? It is quite possible that the idea that the grain or texture is unique is significant. In this way, one can insure oneself of the uniqueness of the furnishings. It is of course another issue why one chooses just *those* "living materials" that happen to be popular just then.

A second type of personalizing strategy consists of the use of "individualizing" combinations of mass-produced items, such as so-called "system furniture." Going through Sweden's largest interior decorating magazine since its inception in the 50's, I found in every year's numbers examples of advertisements which underlines the "individualizing potential" of the furniture: "Starting from any detail at all in the Royal System, you have 16 million possibilities to decorate your home more cosily, more inhabitably and more individually than any other way." (*Allt i Hemmet* Everything in the Home, 1957.9).

In addition to the variations for the different functions, that is, as breakfronts, bars, and stereo sections, one could also get system bookcases with different so-called "front varieties," that is, different styles and types of doors, mountings, and materials.

Thus, this mass-produced system appears to offer special possibilities for the "individualizing" of the home. From this point of view, the current accessories market and the combination possibilities for the home furnishing products have become interesting. Masses of different handles, knobs and mountings offer new personalizing possibilities. The "home decorator" by combining several different standardized products can achieve a personal result. Under the title "Add a personal touch to your home," an advertisement brochure put out by a paint company says that by combining a certain wall-covering material as the base and a certain personally-chosen color nuance on top, one can choose a color which harmonizes - or contrasts - in "your own personal way" with the room's furniture, fabrics, and paintings.

A third personalizing strategy - and certainly a more radical one - is used by those who "build up" the home interior from scratch. This occurs often when older houses are renovated. One gets perhaps authentic and unique details from the local carpenter. Great importance is often placed upon the authentic fixing-up of immobile elements such as a woodburning stove, beams in the ceilings and walls, and getting the right roof tiles.

As illustration for the "individualization efforts" in home decorating, the following, (*Allt i Hemmet*, 1976.4.11,) can be mentioned: "Almost all the furniture in the picture is made-to-

order, even the long bench with its lathe-made curves. . . . Or "All the fire places and walls in the house are white-washed in the old-fashioned way."

Also in the same magazine (1976.4.17), some other young "home decorators" describe their home in the following way, "Here are hand-formed old bricks taken from the chimneys that were torn down, now used for the hearth and tiles of the fireplace in the main room." "The floors are extravagant luxuries-hand-planed after the suggestion of the carpenter himself."

One of Sapir's basic thoughts is made concrete in these examples in a very obvious way. Fashion can combine conformity with one's group *and* personal behavior. "The slight changes from the established in dress or other forms of behavior seem for the moment to give the victory to the individual, while the fact that one's fellows revolt in the same direction gives one a feeling of adventurous safety" (Sapir 1931,140). It is very obvious that these different "personal" ways of decorating which can be found described in the decorating magazines at any time all have the same concrete expression. The striving towards individualization found in fashion follows well-established grooves. As recently as 1976, the reportages on hand-planed floors and hand-formed bricks came quite close together.

A fourth personalizing strategy may consist of a description of how one got the piece of furniture in question. The special, often "luck" acquisition can confer a personal touch to the furnishings. You suddenly find just what you are looking for and know immediately that it is right. you "fall for" a certain piece of furniture instantly.

Getting special furniture through unusual channels can endow them with some "history," as one woman said. To "individualistically" gather one's furnishings from flea markets, inherited pieces, and so on can give "personality." It seems to have become especially common in the last decade to acquire furniture at auctions or other second-hand agencies. Certain numbers of *Allt i Hemmet* in the mid-1970's feature a particularly large number of articles concerning this.

The "personality" of a home can also be emphasized with the help of do-it-yourself activities. This type of reportage was especially

common in the middle 1950's.

Examples of this fourth fashion strategy have taken up only interior decorating, so far, but the world of food also offers striking examples. Take for instance the "hamburger construction" with rows and rows of "trimmings" and combination possibilities. The head of the chain of Wendy hamburger restaurants in the advertisement talks about 256 different kinds. With the help of cheese, tomatoes, ketchup, onions, lettuce, mustard, mayonnaise, and spices. Wendy's customers can construct any of the 256 varieties themselves — everyone can make his own personalized hamburger, from the most simple to a "hamburger Cadillac," (Wyckoff and Sasser, 1978.95).

The presentation is analogous with that of the system furniture described above, with promises "16 million different home interior possibilities."

Thus many food fashions seem to be quite centered around their combination possibilities: pizzas with different ingredients, hamburgers with the widest selection of accompaniments, 20 different flavors of ice cream to choose from and combine, various kinds of pancakes, and salads with a variety of dressings to select from. The variety of possibilities is often pointed out visually - for example, extensive wall menus present 10 different kinds of pancakes, or "... the many new flavors and types of ice cream make it possible to give a personal touch to the assortment." (*Mat for millioner*, Food for Millions, 1980.3.VI).

FURTHER ISSUES

A natural way of continuing with this hypothetical presentation of the fashion strategies we can utilize is to attempt to elucidate *in which situation* we tend to prefer one fashion strategy over the others. Perhaps a particularly common strategy in the world of clothes is the improbable and unexpected combinations. The strategy of using inspiration from afar seems not to be concentrated to any specific area. But concerning food, what is a la mode seems to be emphasized by science and proofs to indicate that it is *not* a question of an "unconscious" tradition.

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