

"THE PRACTICAL" FASHION'S LATEST CONQUEST

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INTRODUCTION

Earlier descriptions of the expansion of fashion often centered on new areas of content, such as first names, or scientific approaches. Here we will see how an *old* area of fashion activity receives new treatment. The subject area is *food*, not in respect to vogue in dishes, but in reference to the *preparation* of food as a matter of vogue. The *practical* has become independent of the *strictly functional*.

It has been maintained in diverse contexts that the swings of fashion affect only things that are actually rather unimportant in life: superficial changes in clothing, adornment, decor, social conduct, and amusements. These fields are not seen as depending on really vital motives of human action. To be sure, even subjects such as religious faith and scientific interest can be steered by fashion, but not until they have been rendered superficial. Fashion does not reach them until they have become detached and therefore "independent of the deeper human motives." (Simmel 1971 298)

This limitation of fashion's activity is criticized today. To a discerning eye, fashion is readily seen as operative in many diverse areas of social life. Blumer mentions fields like the pure and applied arts such as painting, sculpture, music, drama, architecture, dancing, and household decoration. "There is plenty of evidence to show its play in the field of medicine ... it even touches such a relatively sacred area as that of mortuary practice." (Blumer 1973 328) Certain areas are still looked on as closed to fashion. One such sphere is the domain of the sacred, and another is the *practical*. Fashion is not supposed to take root in the areas of utility, technology, or science.

EXPANSION OF FASHION

When it is said that fashion is constantly expanding its fields of activity, it is often a question of new areas of content. Fashion has extended in this century to include not only clothing, but food, home decoration, topics of debate, first names, and scientific theories. I shall view the expansion of fashion from another aspect. Fashion can attack old areas

from new angles. By adopting changing rules about *how* you cook, *how* you attend your garden, and *how* you clean, fashion attacks these utilitarian domains from a utilitarian aspect. And an expansion toward the practical is perhaps more significant in understanding today's fashion than further concern with content.

ACCESSING THE PRACTICAL

The practical domain which will illustrate this second type of the expansion of fashion is cooking. We go back a few decades in time, when the whole cooking process was most often hidden. In restaurants, food was prepared behind closed doors, and often from secret recipes. At home, the housewives stood with their backs to the rest of the family while cooking in the kitchen. For many, time and energy were at a premium in what concerned housekeeping and cooking. Further, most of the preparation and cooking of food had to originate in the home.

My hypothesis is that many of today's utilitarian areas have been liberated to a certain extent from "practical" doctrines and traditional rules. Today, in a completely new way, one can *choose to do some* of the cooking tasks at home. As one advertisement for a food processor puts it: "It does the heavy work: you have the fun!"

The making of food is an area which has been opened to fashion. Fashion requires veritable *settings* where many new proposals can be presented. Here the term *settings* is not confined to fairs and exhibits and other places where the latest approaches are presented. Even on a pedestrian day-to-day level, fashion seems to require such staged scenarios. Many modern restaurants have *cooking scenes*. In pizzerias, restaurants with charcoal grills, and other arrangements, today's guests can watch their dinner being created, and the preparation itself becomes a performance. This is in clear contrast to the restaurants of yesterday, when the food was ceremoniously unveiled with the raising of a silver cover. Voila! There, displayed for the guest's admiration, was the *completed* dish.

Now we line up and watch at the same time

that our charcoal-grilled steaks, pizzas, ice cream sundaes, and flaming deserts are created before our very eyes. Putting the making of food in the limelight places different requirements on the cooking personnel. The chef is on-stage, and cannot retreat to the side to correct possible blunders. At *Benihana* the staff are especially trained so that the preparation becomes something of a spectacle (Wykoff, Sasser 1978 31).

Even if the whole dish cannot be prepared in front of the guests, one is careful to insure that certain strategic steps are carried out before their eyes. Certain elements of the process are more presentable than others, and certain dishes are more suitable for public preparation. In an ice cream parlor advertizing "home-made" ice cream, a great display is made of the machine that bakes the ice cream cones. Presumably, this phase is more suited to demonstration than the manufacture of the "home-made" ice cream.

Whereas in earlier times, the ingredients of a dish were often secret, now the contents are meticulously listed. In salad bars, everything that goes into the various types of salad are often published. Hamburger menus inform of exactly how many grams the different choices weigh, along with the trimmings. What cannot be prepared publicly should be described as exhaustively as possible.

COOKING AT HOME

Even the area of cooking at home has been opened to shifting trends of fashion, such as the move to the *technological*. Today's home kitchen is often equipped with food processors, household assistants, mixers, blenders, pasta machines, ice cream makers, and grain mills, to name only a few. Generally, these new kitchen appliances are not necessities. And there is an important difference when one compares this *home production* with that of the past. In the past, everyone was compelled to do these chores at home. Now, one *chooses* to do them, which means that one can produce and process one's own pasta, carrot juice, and ice cream.

Swedish "fashion commentators" have opposed fashion's dictating the color and design of our practical aids. These commentators, who are often its critics, seem to have misunderstood the extent of the fashion,

because fashion reaches much farther than is apparent. Food processors have added many new *accessoires*, in addition to the old ones, such as strainers, meat grinders, vegetable slicers, and potato peelers. Now one can purchase grating cylinders to grate dried figs, juice extractors, grain mills, and noodle and macaroni presses. Some of these *accessoires* are particularly in vogue at certain times. Fashion may even prescribe that the grain mill should have "schnitzer type" mill stones. Thus, even the functions of the machines have become vulnerable in the highest degree to the whims of fashion.

A natural byproduct of the increased variety and functions of kitchen appliances is the increase in production of certain foods at home. This trend is contrary to what one would expect — that people eat more ready-prepared products and foods. Certain foods which, a decade past, were almost invariably purchased ready-made are now being made at home, with the help of fashionable specialized machines. Pasta is an example. Pasta machines are being sold more widely in Sweden now. Ice cream was formerly made in factories, and now is being prepared in the home.

We can also speak of an *expressive trend* which prescribes for the cook a certain emotional atmosphere and a *way of feeling*. In a brochure for the ingeniously developed technical kitchen appliances, one is very careful not to ignore the appeal to the senses in cooking. For appliances that one fears will be far too mechanical, one reads testimonials in the advertizements: "Sure I had my doubts in the beginning. I thought that there would be no place for feeling and imagination. But ..."

Cook books and food articles today have become both poetic and sensuous. In an article about newly published cook books, the "poetry of recipes" is mentioned. "They are beautiful, richly illustrated cook books filled with facts and fantasy. You can just imagine the colors, tastes, and smells." The same article, discussing some bread recipes says: "They are filled with lyrics and bread." (Translated: Svenska Dagbladet 1981 Nov 5)

Under the heading, "Food is Sensuousness and Perfect Raw Materials," a couple who publish cook books were interviewed. "They

believe that food should be a total experience — with serving and arranging. And it starts already in the kitchen ... with the proper attitudes and feelings" (Translated: *Manads Expressen* 1981 Nov 8 16) Here we see the new approach to fashion. It concerns instructions for the correct state of mind for the cook. One can distinguish shifting trends with regard to the proper temperament of the cook.

FASHION'S PLAY WITH THE PRACTICAL

One can perhaps discern a tendency towards hierarchical organization of fashion's various areas and angles of approach. The *latest thing* most likely appears as something more refined, and something to keep up with. Those who are *in the know* with the latest rules concerning the practical aspects of cooking stand out in the front lines of fashion. Fashion fixes the attention of the community on an object or process at a certain time and place. Now, may certain practical areas stand in the limelight?

The *practical* today can be described in Simmel's words as: to a certain extent, "... removed from the service of life that originally produced and employed it." Simmel sees the "numerous phenomena that we lump together under the category of play" as a particularly clear example of this autonomization of contents. Can we perhaps now say that fashion has acquired the possibility to play with the practical? And can we perhaps describe fashion in the same way that Simmel describes *play*? "From the realities of life it takes only what it can adapt to its own nature, only what it can absorb in its autonomous existence." (Simmel 1964 41,43)

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