

# THE EVOLUTION AND DEMOCRATIZATION OF MODERN FASHION: FROM FREDERICK WORTH TO KARL LAGERFELD'S FAST FASHION

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines how the haute couture associated with fashion evolved from the initial creation of Frederik Worth to Karl Lagerfeld. The main idea is to see how the manifestations of the desire to display himself are grounded on differentiation strategies that are always positioned themselves as an anti-fashion critic of previous fashions. In particular, it will be analyzed three moments in the process of democratization of fashion: the chic haute couture created by Coco Chanel in opposition to Paul Poiret conspicuous and ostentatious fashion, the Yves Saint Laurent strategy that indifferentiates gender, and the fast-fashion strategy developed by Karl Lagerfeld in his collection for H & M. From these three cases, and based on theories Thorstein Veblen and George Simmel, it will be presented a theoretical model that allows us to understand the overall dynamics of fashion change.

## KEYWORDS

Fashion, Coco Chanel., Yves Saint Laurent, Karl Lagerfeld, George Simmel

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

It is now generally accepted that the evolution of fashion in the twentieth century can be described as a process of “democratization”. This was the view established by Gilles Lipovetsky, who understood this democratization as one of the various manifestations of the advancement of the principle of individuality (Lipovetsky, 1987). To that extent, the French sociologist was repeating some of the deepest intuitions of Alexis de Tocqueville (Tocqueville, 1961 [1840]), who will also be one of the guides for the analysis of contemporary fashion in this article. Besides illustrating what Tocqueville called the principle of “equality of conditions”, we will show that the historical evolution of changes in fashion is guided by a principle of differentiation, which consists in the reality of anti-fashion as a form displaying a certain kind of higher existence. Anti-fashion is initially presented as an adherence to a principle of functional comfort that implicitly criticizes the artificiality and ostentation of previous fashion. The ideas of Thorstein Veblen (Veblen, 1994 [1899]) and Georg Simmel (Simmel, 1904) are also guides to the historical analysis that will be carried out in this article. These ideas will link chic fashion with the principle of functionality and comfort.

The first section of the article covers the period from Frederick Worth to Coco Chanel, and will show that functionality in the chic style of Chanel was a way of achieving a higher form of distinction. The second section discusses the work of Yves Saint Laurent, when a real democratization of fashion really started to take place. The third section examines

the concept of fast fashion as proposed in the collection that Karl Lagerfeld developed for H&M, which showed the German couturier dramatically accentuating the trend towards deinstitutionalization and indifferentiation in fashion that was already present in the first ready-to-wear collections. Finally, the conclusion will give a more systematic presentation of the theoretical framework that, based on the works of Tocqueville, Veblen and Simmel, has guided the analysis of the historical trajectory from institutionalized fashion and haute couture to fast fashion.

## 2. THE BIRTH OF HAUTE COUTURE

It was in the mid-nineteenth century that the modern idea of a specific market of luxury goods associated with haute couture was born. Clothing began to abandon the display that had marked the symbolic order of stratified bodies typical of the pre-modern societies of the Ancien Regime, and began to express the social mobility characterized by the spread of economic activity in the market and the corresponding rise of the bourgeoisie. From this time, luxury clothing was linked to success in business and to the commercial idea of meritocracy (Perrot, 1998). The name that can represent the social change taking place at this time is that of Frederick Worth (1825-1895).<sup>1</sup> Worth is generally considered to be the founder of haute couture. His name also represents the empowerment of the couturier. In fact, in the court societies of the Ancien Regime the dressmakers were among the many individuals whose occupation gave them a fixed place under the control of the lord who was their patron. This is a situation that would be reversed with Worth. There started to be a growing number of individuals who went to the fashion designer's studio, and the fashion designer decided on the dress each one of them should wear (Sicard, 2010). While traditionally the tailor was summoned to a noble residence, the new customer attended the atelier of the haute couture tailor, in places like Place Vendôme and Rue Saint Honoré in Paris, which are still centres of world attraction today (Grumbach, 2008).

That was the expression of a social dynamics which resulted in the reversal of positions: during the nineteenth century, the position of the new haute couture fashion designer changed from one of inferiority to one of superiority, while the lord became the customer. The one who was the client/servant became the master, and the one who was the lord became the client. An episode emblematic of this change of position was when Worth was able to persuade the Empress Eugenie, wife of Napoleon III, to wear what he dictated. It may be said that, with regard to haute couture clothing, Worth became king; he became the creator, the original artist whose fame attracted a growing number of clients from the most prominent classes, nobles and bourgeois, all increasingly indiscriminately mixed. He was the first to use human mannequins, parading models to his customers, which actually simulated how his customers could be looked at by others (cf. Kent, 2003). This was a big innovation that shows how the imitation involved in the relationship between model and those copying the model became a structural feature of

<sup>1</sup> See Kent (2003) for an overview of the work of Worth.

modern fashion. The fashion associated with luxury ceased to be something that, as had happened in the societies of the Ancien Regime, an individual was determined to show — something based on a standard external to the individual — and became to do with copying another individual who appears as a model.<sup>2</sup> As will be seen, this is a historical process in which, potentially, an ever-wider range of individuals can themselves aspire, by copying the mannequin, to become models for others. This is literally present in the relationships in a mannequin parade in front of the clientele: each client becomes a kind of mannequin when he copies a mannequin. But there is, however, still some externality: the final seal of authenticity of the model is provided by the haute couture fashion designers, beginning with Worth, who went on to sign their creations, thus giving rise to the concept of luxury brand. This artist's role as certifier of haute couture quality has continued to grow until today, and it is still present, as will be seen below, in fast fashion.

The development of fashion during the nineteenth century expressed a new dynamic. In an era in which social status became mobile, the possession and display of objects of luxury *à la mode* became a way of expressing a new social status. This social condition no longer preceded the showing of clothing to others. It was the possession of the objects which, in itself, allowed one to acquire a new status, a new being that could define bourgeois wealth as an eminently superior existence. The modern fashion became an aspiration; it ceased to be the exhibition of a pre-existent being and now represented the capture of a *being* and denoted a new social status. This means that any individual could potentially become the representative of a mobility that is distinguished by fashion. As Jean-Noel Kapferer says, “the fashion associated with luxury emerged during the nineteenth century as a way to acquire a superior identity that distinguishes it from the others” (Kapferer & Bastien, 2009: 78).

Fashion continued its historical trajectory with the appearance, especially after the First World War, of several French *Maisons*, like those of Lanvin, Chanel and Patou, all based in Paris. In a sense, haute couture represented the institutionalization of fashion. The *Maisons* began releasing collections exactly twice a year, framing fashion as changing fashion within an institutionalized structure. Simultaneously, the haute couture houses positioned themselves as brands associated with luxury, and were always seen as one of the ways to access personal distinction and admiration from others. In general, they increasingly did away with traditional forms of ostentation, passing progressively on to display models showing simple and sober lines, relying on blouses, trousers and pullovers devoid of traditional ornaments and in which comfort is not neglected (cf. Lipovetsky, 1987). As one of the great couturiers of the time, Lucien Lelong, said, “the aesthetic of the period between the two world wars was characterized by (...), (1), the search for congenial simplicity, (2), the return to natural lines of the body” (quoted in Rouff, 1946: 118).

In fashion, as established by the early twentieth century, there is an association between distinction and comfort or functionality. This association began in the nineteenth century, when a dual trend in fashion emerged. On the one hand, fashion was

<sup>2</sup> See (Berry, 1993) for the transition from luxury as an exterior norm imposed on the social classes of the Ancien Regime to modern luxury as an individual desire.

combined with traditional luxury, displaying superfluous objects intended to distinguish their wearer in a conspicuous way, and on the other hand, fashion became a way of dressing that was increasingly associated with privacy, comfort and well-being (Perrot, 1998). This search for functional comfort does not preclude the symbolic manifestations of distinction and material or existential superiority. There is a natural affinity between comfort and distinction, as became clear when Coco Chanel created clothing that was, at the same time, sober, discreet, convenient and chic.



Figure 1. On the left, a model by Paul Poiret (about 1913). On the right, the little black dress designed by Coco Chanel (1926).

The fashion revolution created by Gabrielle (Coco) Chanel, especially during the 1920s, consisted in the final break with the ostensibly conspicuous luxury as displayed by more traditional fashion. The conspicuous still appeared in a couturier who was a contemporary of Chanel, Paul Poiret, with his opulent, sophisticated, wide and long dresses, made from luxurious materials like satin (cf. Figure 1). In contrast, Coco Chanel often resorted to less noble materials like jersey, seeking above all the simplicity of the cut that facilitated agile body movements. For example, one of her most famous creations is the little black dress, with its angular lines entirely different from traditional forms that disguised the natural lines of the female body. The very use of black was a revolution in the tradition of haute couture where only brighter colours were usually admitted. The little black dress was a great symbol of the movement called *garçonnette*, a female emancipation movement which, in the hands of a designer such as Chanel, was a moment in a fundamental trend: the trend towards androgyny that is marked by indifferentiation between the masculine and the feminine. As pointed out by Edmonde Charles-Roux, “the adoption of male attire for female use was the fundamental principle of the art of Chanel” (Charles-Roux, 1974: 78). This was perhaps the first instance of a lack of gender differentiation, whose importance we will also see in the work of Yves Saint Laurent. It is the masculinization of females, which is present in many outfits with a sporting inspiration that were designed by Coco Chanel. This principle was linked to the aim of “demonstrating that the practical and everyday could be the source of a high style, until then invariably rooted in luxury and the exotic” (Chaney, 2011: 107). Functional comfort and distinctive style are therefore not opposed, and probably it was the association between these two aspects that has given much historical importance to the work of Coco Chanel.

This association became one of the dominant features of the evolution of fashion in the twentieth century.

It is necessary to have a better understanding of why functional comfort can be a mark of a distinct personal identity. As noted, the pursuit of simplicity by Chanel consisted in the refusal of the opulent, elaborate and ornate clothing characteristic of more traditional haute couture. What her customers sought was “a visible quality of simplicity and chic without parallel” (Chaney, 2011: 125). By using less noble materials, and making the models resemble common people, Chanel could create a maximum form of distinction that is precisely a form with no distinction: her creations are opposed to the conspicuous and ostentatious clothing that characterized earlier fashion. Like the nineteenth-century dandies, whose strategy Chanel copied (Vinken, 2005: 22), the use of simple models, in whom the trained eye immediately recognizes status and style, is a form that does not ostensibly distinguish but is in reality a form of higher distinction, calling for everyone’s attention by, ostensibly, not calling for attention. With Chanel, distinction becomes the chic distinction that is no longer the distinction present in the luxury designs created by Paul Poiret but is rooted in simplicity and functionality. Stated more precisely, it is the contrast between the designs created by Chanel and Paul Poiret which leads one to consider the latter as conspicuous and ostentatious. The Chanel designs were *different*, distinct in both senses of the word: their distinction resided precisely, through its simplicity, in their distinction from traditional fashion. The fashion inaugurated by Chanel “was a style that ridiculed fashion, a nihilistic fashion that was an anti-fashion” (Wilson, 1985: 41), thus inaugurating the modern movement in fashion as a turning against the previous fashion. Beginning with Coco Chanel, this movement will always entail that which is destined to become a new fashion being initially presented as an anti-fashion, as a critique of fashion. This strategy usually highlights the functionality and comfort of clothing, valuing the individual autonomy of women, to the detriment of earlier fashion which, given the simplicity and naturalness of the proposed new fashion, finally emerges as artificial and inauthentic. As we will see again below, this strategy of anti-fashion that denounces the artificiality of fashion is a new and higher form of chic distinction that creates new fashions.



Figure 2. A chic model sportswear designed by Jean Patou in 1927.

The display of chic fashion disguised by the functional comfort of a garment naturally tailored to the body became a dominant feature of the *Maisons* in the 1920s. Like Chanel, *Maison Patou* launched sports-inspired collections and sportswear, which also became synonymous with chic distinction (cf. Figure 2). The association between distinction and functionality was highlighted by Jean Patou himself:

My models are designed for the practice of sport. I want them to be nice to look at when being used, and that they allow great freedom of movement.  
(Quoted in Lipovetsky, 1987: 86)

This was comfortable functional clothing but clothing that gave distinction. With the advance of the twentieth century, and in a movement that has continued until today, simple and comfortable clothing that also gives a distinct individual identity itself became a generalized fashion.

The fashion houses created in the early decades of the twentieth century also began the process that can roughly be called the “democratization of luxury” or the “democratization of fashion” (Lipovetsky, 1987). The American magazine *Vogue* even compared a piece like a Chanel little black dress with the new mass production of Ford automobiles, and Marcel Rouff later wrote that the democratization of women’s clothing followed the democratization of the automobile (Rouff, 1946). The comparison was no exaggeration, because, in the same way that cars have become an aspiration for a growing number of individuals, the Chanel style was no longer totally inaccessible, becoming an aspiration, even if one that was never fully realized, for an increasing number of women. The new social reality was well summarized by Paul Poiret in the final phase of his career:

There should be as many models as there are women. (Poiret, 1974 [1930]: 109)

The phrase reveals the individualism that underlies the woman who shows herself through the couture that happens to be fashionable. Above all, it also reveals a tension peculiar to modern societies. Any woman should be able to access the position of a model, a model for other women who will copy her style and, through clothing, want to be what she is – that is, who wish to capture her being. However, this situation is logically impossible to realize because if there are models there must be followers of these models and therefore all women cannot, simultaneously, be models. Nevertheless, Poiret’s phrase describes a situation in which, potentially and over time, any woman can be a model, and so can be admired by other women. But given the fact that the model position is only potentially available, and therefore can never become fully realized, the ideal described by Poiret can never fully be achieved. The consequence of this gap between the ideal and the real is a ceaseless movement of new fashions caused by the frustration of never completely being a model.

### 3. THE DEMOCRATIZATION OF FASHION: YVES SAINT LAURENT

In the context of the fashion trends of haute couture that emerged in the 1920s, typified by names like Chanel and Patou, it has previously been possible to refer to the “democratization of fashion”. This democratization movement was always contemporary with the social movement towards the equality of conditions, in the theory of Alexis de Tocqueville (Tocqueville, 1961 [1840]). The equality of conditions is a state based on a social normative principle according to which any individual can, over time, come to occupy any social position. The equality of conditions does not define any political regime or any real social state that has been fully achieved, but rather a new social norm according to which the positions of individuals have become increasingly interchangeable, and it is opposed to the ancient societies in which individuals were deemed to occupy a certain social position. The equality of conditions is a norm stipulating that any position is open to anyone. An individual occupies at a certain moment a “high” position, or a position of “prestige”, and another occupies a “low” position, but the equality of conditions means that, potentially and over time, these individuals can switch positions. In the social regime of the equality of conditions, all men and women potentially become models for each other, and thus anyone can be desired by someone else. In the case of fashion, the further the equality of conditions advances, the more fashion is democratized, in the sense that ever-wider sectors of society become, actually or potentially, initiators (models) and followers (imitators) of fashions.

At the time of the first creations of Poiret, Chanel and Patou, this democratization process was still in its infancy, and the “equality of conditions” in which everyone can appropriate the model’s position was far from real. The haute couture dressmaker conceived original designs primarily for quite rich classes, even if, over the decades, traces of these models have been widely adopted, according to the theory of the vertical diffusion of fashion designs by Thorstein Veblen: fashion is initially adopted by the upper classes and afterwards is imitated by the lower classes (Veblen, 1994 [1899]). This haute couture designed by couturiers ranging from Worth to Chanel and Patou was the fashion, which emerged initially as distant and inaccessible to large segments of the population.

The moment that might be designated as the real moment of the democratization of fashion occurred during the 1960s with the popularization of couturiers like André Courrèges and, especially, Yves Saint Laurent. Although he was arguably an extremely creative fashion designer, it is nevertheless possible to say that with Saint Laurent the figure of the absolutely original couturier, who supposedly creates only from himself, disappears. From the 1960s, Saint Laurent blurred fashion by practising mixtures. In what sense did he do this? First of all, Yves Saint Laurent was increasingly inspired by non-Western costumes and customs, mixing those costumes with the tradition of French haute couture. He thus reflected the trend of the ethnic opening of the West to other customs and other cultural forms which was a dominant feature of the movement of ideas in the 1960s. He was also perhaps the first great couturier who, from the 1970s, used

mannequins originating from outside Europe.<sup>3</sup> Before Saint Laurent, couturiers such as Paul Poiret had sought inspiration from the exotic orient.<sup>4</sup> But the real creativity of Yves Saint Laurent was based in his inspiration from the “street”. Traditional institutionalized fashion was modelled on an original creation by a great couturier and was aimed at a social elite, followed by an, albeit limited, vertical diffusion. Instead, the creations of Saint Laurent incorporated fashions that had developed spontaneously in the “street”. These were not fashion in the sense of the luxury fashion typical of haute couture. They were fashion with its origin among the youth of London and Paris (cf. Breward, 2004).

It is this kind of fashion that Saint Laurent adopted in his creations, conceiving a high couture that “came from the bottom up” and that used mixtures. An early example occurred when, in 1960, the Parisian couturier imported into his creations the leather jacket that had become fashionable among young Londoners. Another example was the importation into haute couture of jeans. This case again shows clearly how, in the hands of a great couturier, functional comfort can be a way to create style and distinction; in fact, jeans originated with farm workers, and after this their use passed to the young and then to the intellectual classes, culminating in a mixture of haute couture (cf. Wilson, 1985). This is, of course, the meaning of Saint Laurent’s famous phrase of “down with the Ritz, long live the street”: fashion is inspired by the “street”. Because of their functionality, from the 1960s jeans became an anti-fashion that, once again, denounced the artificiality of previous fashions; as always, the new fashion was not an artificial one, but rather one that meant a truly individual distinction.<sup>5</sup>

The generalized lack of differentiation present in the work of Yves Saint Laurent also focused on gender, and included mixing feminine with masculine elements. He broke the barriers between the sexes. More precisely, he contributed to the absence of differentiation between the positions of “man” and “woman”. The best-known examples of this were the female models wearing trousers as well as the famous tuxedo female. If Coco Chanel had previously been seen to masculinize females, with Saint Laurent we can witness a still greater lack of differentiation between the male and the female positions. “Inspired by the street” and increasingly mixing the fashions of gender, haute couture became less and less an institution that was closed in on itself. It still involves an exteriority, but it is mostly an exteriority (the great couturier) who *certifies* that which originated elsewhere, “in the street” and in exotic cultures. What always survive couture are the *brands*, creating a desire that does not concern functionality but is *brand desire* (cf. Sicard, 2008).

The democratization of fashion carried out by Yves Saint Laurent also had a more specific sociological dimension, when he opened the doors of the house where he began his work, the *Maison Dior*, to a wider audience than the audience of traditional haute couture. Equally important was that he created, in the 1960s, ready-to-wear collections, sometimes called luxury ready-to-wear. This is a trend that had already been inaugurated by Christian Dior. As Saint Laurent said:

<sup>3</sup> On the life and work of Yves Saint Laurent, see (Bergé, 1997); (Benaïm, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> See (Troy, 2003) for an overview of this type of influence.

<sup>5</sup> On the cool style of the sixties as a systematic criticism of fashion and ostentatious consumption, cf. Frank (1996).



The time has passed, when couturiers were exalted by creating models exclusively reserved to a privileged clientele of women. (Quoted in: Cézanne, 1967: 130)

It will be shown how the ready-to-wear collections made by Karl Lagerfeld accelerated the closure of the gap between the “rich” and the “poor”. There was not only a social levelling of access to fashion. While traditional luxury fashion was well marked by the unchanging benchmark of the seasons, Saint Laurent’s ready-to-wear collections meant the creation of timeless models without oscillations according to station or circumstance and without a well-defined target audience (Pinto de Sousa, 2010). The following quote shows once again the blurring tendency present in Saint Laurent’s creations:

It is finished the time when women should change their wardrobe every six months. Nowadays, ‘outmoded’ means nothing! When I see that my old dresses mix with those from last year, I’m glad. This is the true reflection of our time. (Quoted in Pinto de Sousa, 2010: 37)

Fashion is no longer marked by the regular rhythm of the seasons. Fashion will no longer be marked by signs of social ostentation, and nor does fashion mark a social status or condition that can be seen by looking at a person’s clothes. Fashion is no longer ostentatious in a conspicuous way. Women’s clothing should not remain as a simple way of performing the old function of pleasing a man, and neither does fashion still participate in a desire for social equality between the sexes. From the 1960s, a woman has dressed for herself, to express herself. She does not dress in a way that looks fashionable, but dresses to reconstruct a basic social relation of seduction. This point was also stressed by Saint Laurent:

This is without no doubt a revolution of mind. People have no more desire to be fashionable: they want to seduce. (Quoted in Cézanne, 1967: 130)

This being for oneself is a strategy for capturing, for aspiring to be, other individuals. In general, haute couture was a movement that adopted the dandy fashion to women’s fashion, as the female smoking tuxedo suit illustrates (Vinken, 2005). With Yves Saint Laurent, this movement is no longer linked to any transcendent rule and it consists in the manifestation of a desire associated with the principle of individuality (Lipovetsky, 1987).

#### 4. KARL LAGERFELD AND H&M FAST FASHION

Following the commercial strategies inaugurated by houses such as Dior, Cardin and Yves Saint Laurent with their ready-to-wear collections, brands traditionally perceived as luxury brands started to address themselves to the vast majority of consumers, first of all in Western countries, and afterwards in emerging economies. Their ready-to-wear collections became their main source of revenue, after which the brands began marketing all kinds of accessories (cf. Tungate, 2007). Still later, especially since the 1990s, several major *Maisons* merged into larger conglomerates owning a broad portfolio of brands

aimed at world markets. The traditional haute couture fashion shows were more and more reduced to actual manifestations of artistic creation, without having a real impact on direct sales (cf. Moor, 2007). For the new conglomerates, the business model has become explicitly based on the “democratization of luxury”, or the sale of mass products perceived as premium products. As noted by several authors (such as Vinken, 2005), the 1980s marked the end of traditional haute couture.

In the new business model for luxury, there is also a strategy of vertical diffusion: luxury brands become accessible to a growing number of consumers. We can say that there is a movement from “high” to “low”, and that these positions are tending to approach each other. Even more recently, a new trend has emerged in commercial fashion and luxury, which reverses the previous one and can be characterized by an increasing fusion of the “high” and the “low” positions. This fusion results from the combination of the two trends. On the one hand, there is the historical trend of vertical diffusion: what was a “high”, luxury product becomes accessible to a large number of individuals scattered through the entire globe. On the other hand, and in parallel with the trend of vertical diffusion, there is an opposite movement in which what was considered “low” is now closer to what was considered “high” and luxury. It is this dual trend that brings together the two positions, “high” and “low”.

The best example of the increasing identification of the positions associated with fashion are the collections designed by famous couturiers and designers that H&M started selling some ten years ago. Recall that H&M (Hennes and Mauritz) is a brand of fast fashion (the rapid and continuous production of new clothes) that sells clothes for all genders and ages. From 2004, the company began to focus on the work of designers and renowned figures such as Karl Lagerfeld, Stella McCartney, Viktor & Rolf, Madonna, Roberto Cavalli, Comme des Garçons, Matthew Williamson, Jimmy Choo, Versace, Marni and David Beckham, among others. Here we describe how the great couturier Karl Lagerfeld saw his collaboration with H&M; we do not look here at the creative work that the German designer has developed for Chanel over recent decades.

H&M's initial strategy was to render “the cheap desirable” by designing pieces that possess a quality and design similar to luxury brands:

My concept of ready-to-wear today at whatever level is that it has to be as good as the most expensive brand. Design is very important and design is not a question of price any more. (Quoted in Menkes, 2004)

Through creations sealed and certified by Karl Lagerfeld, a brand in the “low” position, such as H&M, can also become “high”. This requires that someone who is associated with the “high” segment, like a great couturier from Chanel, descends to the “low” segment. This descent is accompanied by an explicit criticism of ostentatious luxury fashion. According to the natural cycle of fashion, this luxury is explicitly denounced as artificial and totally snobbish.

The promotional advertisement for the Karl Lagerfeld collection makes this point perfectly clear.<sup>6</sup> The advertisement shows images of Cannes and a world of privileged

<sup>6</sup> See the video at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uSV3-UOe9Jg>.

individuals, vaguely aristocratic and decadent. The advertisement then turns on someone — Karl Lagerfeld himself — who belongs to this world of supposed exclusivity and glamour. Two individuals, visibly snobs, comment on the rumour that Karl Lagerfeld is leaving his own world by designing “cheap” clothes, aimed at “people” who belong to another sort of world. They are completely horrified by the idea that their exclusivity — the uniqueness of the world associated with Lagerfeld — would be shared by someone else. Their extreme snobbery is manifest in how they dislike the idea of sharing Lagerfeld with “others”. Lagerfeld has never seemed as desirable to them as he is now that he is making cheap clothes. And that is not the only thing. The German fashion designer “makes some women very happy”, giving to others the happiness that they thought was their natural and exclusive possession. “What are the consequences of this change throughout our universe?” asks one snob. Lagerfeld is considered to be “a traitor”. “Is it really true that he gives pleasure to other beings who do not belong to our natural universe?” ask some of the actors in the advertisement constantly. Finally, the question is addressed directly to Lagerfeld himself: “Is it true?”. Lagerfeld answers, “Of course it’s true.” And the question is “Is it cheap?”. “It is all about taste.” The advertisement clearly displays the natural cycle of fashion. Exclusivity is no longer exclusive. It is when members of a certain universe of exclusivity cease to possess it that they seem to desire it more and more, thus bringing to light all the artificiality and snobbery of their behaviour. Traditional luxury is a snobbery that becomes manifest when rivals appear due to the loss of exclusivity. It is when this rivalry appears that the artificiality of fashion and its alleged uniqueness becomes apparent: it is clear that fashion is merely a latent rivalry between individuals. The message of H&M’s advertisement is that this unmasked artificiality should be replaced by something really authentic. The advertisement, in Lagerfeld’s own words, says that fashion is no longer a question of being “cheap” or “expensive”, exclusive or not exclusive, but a matter of individual taste, personal taste. Obviously this applies not just to any kind of objects, but to objects that bear the mark of a prestigious being such as Karl Lagerfeld. Subliminally, the idea is present that, by using cheap products from H&M designed by Lagerfeld, anyone (any woman) can penetrate into a world of exclusivity and distinction, but that this world is really authentic. One of the interests of H&M’s promotional campaign is that it explains even more clearly the relationship between functional comfort and fashion that has been referred to above when we looked at the creations of Coco Chanel as opposed to those of Paul Poiret, and when we looked at the massive popularity of jeans in the 1960s. The natural cycle of fashion displayed by the H&M announcement was admirably explained in the early twentieth century by Thorstein Veblen in his theory about fashion change (Veblen, 1994 [1899]: 218 et seq.). For Veblen, the possession of objects means much more than just the satisfaction of functional needs: it gives prestige to the owner. In other words, the possession of certain objects allows an individual to have a quality of being that makes him or her superior and the subject of the admiration of others. Clothing serves to give prestige, and functionality is just a means to that end, as is proved by the constant changes of fashion that do not respond to any functional need. Now, conspicuous prestige involves a certain emptiness, a sort of artificiality. For

Veblen, this emptiness, this kind of display without any purpose beyond the display itself, tends to become “offensive to the taste of the native”. It follows that the “native”, that is, the observer, condemns such fatuity. It is precisely to avoid such social condemnation that we seek to argue that every change in dress simulates an alleged functionality or usefulness. But this change is soon perceived by others for what it really is, a mere concealment of utility denoting exhibitionist and totally artificial behaviour. The risk, actual or potential, of a condemnation on the part of others makes us change our fashion again, simulating an alleged new utility and thus restarting the process. Fashion change then becomes an endless process. In the H&M advertisement, it is the snob’s conspicuous consumption, the traditional haute couture, that “offends the taste of the native”. The behaviour of the snobs in the advertisement reveals the artificiality of fashion, and such behaviour is to be replaced by the consumption of the simple, functional, natural and above all cheap items that H&M sells. The cheap is chic and this is a new fashion.

In several interviews, Karl Lagerfeld has developed his views on the new reality of fashion.

I loved to do H&M because it was an experience. People like me were supposed to be into exclusivity, unapproachable. That’s what I hate most. I think it’s very *démodé*. T-shirts for ten dollars are even more fashion today than expensive fashion (...). That is a fashion, too. The fashion of no-fashion is another fashion. (Lagerfeld, 2011a)

Nowadays, the main fashion lies in changing fashion. And the main way to change is through no-fashion, through anti-fashion. In the words of an expert such as Lagerfeld, the fashion of no-fashion is today the main fashion. To be in fashion is to refuse Fashion with a capital F, the luxury fashion designed to display ostentatious conspicuous consumption. This type of consumption has definitely become out of fashion. The fashion of haute couture is out of fashion. But it is also out of fashion to be fashionable, in the sense of visibly imitating the fashion of others. To be in fashion is to present oneself as someone who does not follow any fashion, even if this involves the display of the ostentatious refusal of fashion. As a result, especially if it differs from any existing fashion, any object has become a possible source of fashion, including the 10 euros blouses sold at H&M. Traditionally, Fashion (with a capital F) was confined to restricted social universes. The key point that should be stressed is that, today, fashion is everywhere. Fashion models are no longer members of the affluent classes, as was the case in the model of traditional fashion. The historical dynamics of equality of conditions identified by Tocqueville continued on his route. Today’s model is anyone, beginning with those who, refusing fashion and adopting anti-fashion, create a new fashion. Thus, in one way or another, we are all in any fashion, and that fashion no longer has to be associated with traditional luxury or some specific utility. Lagerfeld is quite explicit on this point:

Fashion is much lighter than it used to be in the past, and is part of life for everyone, even to people who are not concerned with it. Today one can not escape fashion because fashion is everywhere. (Lagerfeld, 2011b)

Therefore, there are no longer fixed positions with respect to fashion. There is no “high” fashion or “low” fashion. What is “low” is no more, and can, in the same way as what is “high”, be used as the manifestation of a personal distinction addressed to others. Lagerfeld is also clear about the lack of differentiation between “high” and “low”:

Fashion is high and low, and low isn't low today anymore. (Lagerfeld, 2011c)

The lack of distinction between “high” and “low” translates into the practice of mixtures. It was partly because of the tendency for mixtures revealed by consumers that H&M launched collections made by famous designers. The relationship between the Swedish company and Lagerfeld was based on the idea that consumers of products associated with luxury are attracted by occasional lower prices, while less affluent classes of individuals buy fashion products in cheap department stores (Gouveia, 2011). There are many people who buy Louis Vuitton bags, then buy shirts at Zara and then jeans at Gap. Many people buy Louis Vuitton and use Nivea (Sicard, 2008). There are people who buy jeans and cheap T-shirts, then wear them with an haute couture coat. Why? Because, according to Lagerfeld, it “is something that's part of life today” that is, it is fashionable (Lagerfeld, 2011d). The “high” buy “low”, and the “low” buy “high”. The same person buys “high” and buys “low”, and that is fashion. It was this kind of lack of differentiation that guided the commercial strategy of H&M that is based on famous designers.

## 5. CONCLUSION

In this article we analysed the way fashion has evolved from the first creations of haute couture to contemporary fast fashion. We saw that there was a movement towards the democratization of luxury, in that fashion started to be a little all over the place, no longer confined to the narrow circle of the creations of fashion designers of the first major *Maisons*. This diffusion process is different from the vertical diffusion process of Veblen's theory. For this Norwegian sociologist, the adoption of fashion was a vertical process that began with the conspicuous affluent classes and was then propagated to the less affluent classes. And there is no doubt that this form of diffusion retains its validity in part, as is clear when one observes that the trends created by Chanel and Yves Saint Laurent became objects of general adhesion.

However, if we seek to develop a theoretical framework about the process of fashion change, it must be acknowledged that Veblen's ideas about fashion are insufficient. It was a great insight to note that the perception of artificiality in any fashion induces a change of fashion, but his theory has a problem, because it starts with a hierarchical social structure, segmented into watertight classes, and it is within this structure that imitative vertical diffusion takes place. The ruling classes, for Veblen, are leisure classes who do not copy anyone, and so there is still no explanation of why they believe that certain garments confer prestige. Moreover, even if the vertical diffusion continues to operate if we consider relatively long historical times, we also saw above that there is an increasing diffusion of fashions that can be called horizontal, and in which any individual or group, and no longer a specific class, can be a model for all others (cf. Orlean, 2011: 132 et seq.).

It was this kind of situation which was admirably anticipated by Tocqueville, when placing equality of conditions as the norm of modern societies. For the French sociologist, more important than class differences is the fact that, potentially, any individual can be a model for any other individual. Imitation is mainly horizontal, and can spread from neighbour to neighbour, reaching a wide number of individuals. This imitative process is sufficient to explain why a certain individual will eventually be invested with prestige without, once again, it being necessary to invoke the utility or functionality of consumption goods.

If the recognition of the role of artificiality can be considered as one of Veblen's most important contributions to the concept of fashion, it was Georg Simmel who drafted the broader general theory about fashion (Simmel, 1904). He explicitly said that imitation is the factor that explains the adoption of and change in fashion. Although Simmel also accepted the model of vertical diffusion, he highlighted (Simmel, 1904: 135) the fact that the closer individuals are to each other, the greater the desire of those who are in the inferior position to imitate those in the superior position. For Simmel, following Tocqueville, there is the idea that individuals are compared to and compete with each other, and the more they compete the more they tend to accentuate their differences. Fashion has a regulatory social function by ensuring that that rivalry between individuals does not result in physical destructive violence. Simmel identified two key tendencies ("forces") in fashion. On the one hand there is the tendency to generalize, which is an imitative process that leads to widespread adherence to one fashion. This is well suited to both vertical and horizontal diffusion of fashion. More importantly, we think, there is another tendency, the tendency for differentiation, *which is also based on imitation*. First, differentiation follows, mechanically, from fashion adhesion: when an individual or group of individuals adheres to a fashion, that individual or group is *ipso facto* distinguished from another group exactly by "not displaying the same fashion" (Simmel, 1904: 134). This type of distinction is a distinction that involves *exclusion*. In this sense, fashion separates and unites, simultaneously. It unites those who, by exhibiting the same set of external signs, feel united into a group, a union involving the exclusion of those outside the group. Second, another type of differentiation happens when the dominant fashion becomes the fashion of changing fashion. Simmel defined this process as a "negative imitation" (Simmel, 1904: 142). The driving force behind this process is precisely the refusal to follow the current fashion, and thus everyone follows the fashion of changing fashion; finally, they all converge to the same fashion or to a plurality of fashions. Refusing, consciously, to follow fashion is a form of differentiation that supposedly aims to achieve the maximum degree of individualization, but in reality is subject to the same social demands as are present in the adoption (driven by the force of generalization) of a current fashion. The principle of differentiation is a supreme form of distinction, distinct from the behaviour of those who, by the principle of generalization, merely follow fashion. Instead, the principle of differentiation exhibits itself in the form of anti-fashion but, as happens in generalization, it is based on imitation ("negative"); nevertheless, this principle implies the fashion of fashion change and thus distinguishes those individuals who are passively following fashion from those who present themselves as different.

It is this principle of differentiation that we have identified in the evolution of haute couture and fashion during the twentieth century. It should be noted that the principle of differentiation does not oppose, but rather is complemented by, Veblen's theory on

the perception of artificiality that leads to fashion change. The individual who acts in the pursuit of difference and the refusal of fashion is searching for a supposed individual authenticity that is opposed to what he estimates to be artificial, as “mere fashion”. It was this connection between artificiality, fashion and a principle of differentiation, linked to functionality, that this article sought to establish through the analysis of Coco Chanel's chic style, through the dissemination of the ideas of Yves Saint Laurent and through looking at the advertising campaign of H&M. ✍

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