

THE IDEOLOGY OF CONSUMPTION IN FASHION: A DIACHRONIC PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to explore the ideology of consumption (in particular, the fashion consumption) diachronically. It begins by reflecting on the genesis and development of a new consumption paradigm in its interdependence with the urban infrastructure, addressing one of its key milestones: the architectural changes operated in Paris in the nineteenth century, at the hands of Haussmann, and the emergence of the department stores. This reflection then focuses on another key aspect: the emergence of shopping malls in Europe, which are considered imaginary universes in this article. It also discusses the ideology of consumption, driven by shopping malls, in the light of the changes caused by the acceleration of consumption and the fast-fashion phenomenon. It highlights, in addition, the new order of incorporation of fashion brands in multinational corporations, which changed the market rules on a global scale. Finally, it focuses on the new consumption cathedrals.

KEYWORDS

Modernity; paradigm; desire; consumption

1. INTRODUCTION

If we take into account that we currently live in the galaxy of modernity, it does not seem irrelevant to probe the origin of this cultural paradigm to try and understand the lifestyles that it produced.

It can be stated that the revolutions that generated modernity – the techno-scientific revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Enlightenment revolution of the eighteenth century and the industrial revolution, with its utmost expression in the nineteenth century – dictated a great acceleration of time that still remains in contemporary times. Like Campbell, we are led into considering that the industrial revolution was also a ‘consumption revolution’ (1987). According to Meffesoli, this acceleration is the ‘mark of the modern drama’ (2008: 1).

These revolutions, alongside the French Revolution and the reconstruction of Paris by Georges-Eugène Haussmann (1809-1891), favoured the development of consumption. A consumerist mentality thus arose that was primarily reserved for certain classes, such as nobles, artists, and, more generally, the bourgeois population. In the narrower context of nineteenth-century Europe, the factors that contributed most to this consumerist mentality were industrialization, the increased trade and the demographic changes, especially in the urban context.

2. ARCHITECTURAL RENOVATION OF PARIS BY HAUSSMANN AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF CONSUMPTION – IMPLICATIONS

But let us stick specifically to the case of Paris, which under Haussmann's spur led to the city reaching its peak of expropriations and fraudulent speculation. It was about building a new city. Walter Benjamin, in his unfinished work entitled *Paris, Capitale du Siècle XIXe: Le Livre des Passages*, highlights that '(...) The power brokers want to keep their status with blood (the police), with cunningness (fashion), with magics (pomp)' (Benjamin, 1993: 157 [E 5a, 7]).

From an architectural point of view, Haussmann's renovations were based on the rationalization of space and on the interconnection between the city and its whole, by outlining streets and building markets, large avenues, galleries and lighting systems. Additionally, they built upon, for example, the decision to solve the problem of public hygiene, by implementing water distribution and waste collection systems. This leads us into concluding that modernity then began gaining shape. Keeping the city safe was also at stake. The wide streets would prevent the construction of barricades, thereby avoiding uprisings, while at the same time keeping away the poorer classes, who moved to the suburbs of Paris. The city reconstruction forced the working class to move to the suburbs, thus destroying 'the tie of neighbourhood that bound it to the bourgeois' (Benjamin, 1993: 148 [E 2, 2]).

The transformations wrought in the design of the city and in the profile of the inhabitants evidently reflected upon the attitudes and interpersonal relations.

Department stores popped up while structural transformations were introduced in the urban centres. It was in the mid-nineteenth century that these new centres of development of the consumerist drive arose: 'Le Bon Marché, Le Louvre, La Belle Jardinière' (Benjamin, 1993: 76 [A 6, 2]). In 1865 the *Printemps* galleries were founded, followed by *La Samaritaine* in 1869 and the *La Fayette* galleries in 1895. Benjamin, quoting Baudelaire, claims that under the 'religious ecstasy of the great cities of Baudelaire, the great *magasins* are temples devoted to this ecstasy' (Benjamin, 1993: 87 [A13]).

Le Bon Marché was created by Aristide Boucicaut and Justin Videau. This *magasin* later became under the exclusive domain of Aristide Boucicaut, and some of its management practices that still prevail today are probably rooted in the nineteenth century. Aristide Boucicaut was a pioneer in marketing when he developed a set of practices that involved, for example, the rotation of different products, attractive pricing policies and small profit margins. This allowed for a greater diversity of products being marketed. 'The fixed price tag was another daring innovation' (Benjamin, 1993: 86 [A12, 1]), since until then prices were negotiated between customers and merchants. He was also a pioneer, for example, when he devised multiple sections within the *Le Bon Marché* with different employees, as well as a returns policy. This was the first department store that encouraged the desire of *coqueterie* and the rapture through the look. So it can be argued that the consumerist society started gaining shape there and then. *Le Bon Marché* served as the archetype for the department stores that followed. In this type of department stores, the product display, the store fronts and the flow of buyers roaming inside not only contributed, but encouraged a new routine, a new experience, which materialized in the act of buying, thus giving rise to a new social

praxis. In his discussion of nineteenth-century Paris and of the correlation between the urban infrastructure that was built and the genesis and development of the new consumption paradigm, Benjamin states: 'goods thrive in the façades of houses and establish new and fantastic relationships' (Benjamin, 1993: 73 [A 3 a, 7]). The shift from the old 'novelty shops' to large warehouses required significant changes based mostly on product display, shop windows and storefronts, in order to sell goods to a rich bourgeoisie. Iron and glass prevail in these spaces of architectural grandeur. As the words of our guiding author, Benjamin (1993: 176 [F 2, 9]), put it: 'The first iron constructions had provisional aims: covered markets, railway stations, exhibitions.'

As a result of these material and mental transformations, universal exhibitions played a decisive role in the process of legitimization and glorification of science and technology, in which '(...) the entertainment industry refines and multiplies the varieties of the reactive behaviour of the masses. It thus prepares them to be trained by advertising. The lesson learnt by this industry from the universal exhibitions is therefore well justified' (Benjamin, 1993: 176 [G 16, 7]).

What happens in society also reflects on the literature. Émile Zola, for example, in one of his very popular feuilletons of the nineteenth century, *Au Bonheur des Dames*, which was published in 1883, provided a description of the opening of the first department store, *Le Bon Marché*, in Paris. The novelist's description, inspired by this department store, allows us to reflect on the impact that the opening had. According to Zola: 'The great strength was especially advertising. Mouret used to spend up to three hundred thousand francs a year in catalogues, ads and posters. (...) The *Bonheur des Dames* drew everyone's attention, invaded the walls, the newspapers, the curtains of the theatres' (1984: 261). Each and every poster, ad, shelf, store window, display and showcase is devoted to the pageantry and the desire, and consumption is portrayed as the propeller of modernity.

Benjamin, in turn, stresses that 'trade and traffic are the two components of the street.' But according to the author, what remains is pretty much just a 'passage', which is 'the lascivious shopping street, simply aimed at awakening desires', where 'the goods thrive' (Benjamin, 1993: 73 [A 3 a, 7]). The image of a new cathedral of glass and steel, where investment in the desire and beauty replaced the old fervour, overwrites the image of the mediaeval cathedrals: 'The churches where the faltering faith gradually deserted were replaced by its bazaar, in their now vacant souls' (Vigarello, 2005: 204).

The rise of department stores, marked by impersonality, contributed to the eradication of small businesses. The districts 'devoured' by the hand of baron Haussmann made room for large avenues and big markets, and contributed to the rise of the middle class and to a fortunate bourgeoisie, for whom these 'times of consumption' are reserved. According to Benjamin, with the coming of department stores 'consumers began to have the feeling of existence as a mass (at first, only deprivation leads to it). The circus features and the theatrical element of trade contribute significantly to it' (Benjamin, 1993: 73 [A 4, 1]).

Another thinker, Baudrillard, in the *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, claims that there is fashion only in the context of modernity. After alternating between ancient and modern, as

a result of the Industrial Revolution and the Enlightenment, '(...) modernity sets up a linear time of technical progress, production and history, and, simultaneously, a cyclical time of fashion' (Baudrillard, 1996: 115).

From the mid-nineteenth century until the 1960s, 'when the system began to crack and to transform itself to some extent, the organization was so stable that it is legitimate to speak of a fashion that lasted a hundred years. This was the first phase of the history of modern fashion, its sublime, heroic moment' (Lipovetsky, 1987: 80). In line with the author's assumptions, the concept of 'one hundred years fashion' was the outcome of a cycle that was based on this organizational structure of the ephemeral. It was in this context that the democratization of fashion, which would gradually assert itself during the twentieth century, gained shape, in parallel with luxury or class distinction. In this new fashion empire, a system emerged that was divided into two main interrelated areas: the *haute couture* and the industrial production. If the former lies in the creation of luxury and in the exclusivity of the models, the latter tends to mass-produce copies of those models. Thus, fashion unfolds in two parts that differ in terms of techniques, prices, materials, audience and degree of recognition.

Since fashion does not exist without fashion designers, in all eras designers have been distinguished who were instrumental as an archetype of their generation, as of subsequent generations. The originality of the models, the uniqueness of shapes and volumes, the peculiarity of the cuts, the exuberance of overlaps, the irreverence / discretion of the colour palette and the novelty of the props and accessories have inspired contemporary fashion designers. They exist as a reference to fashion researchers, and remain in the collective imaginary of consumers. It is now known that the eras of world conflict led to the decline of consumption and to the exodus of renowned designers to other countries. Conversely, post-conflict eras were periods of great expansion, major technological advances, increased consumption and stimulation of creation.

Due to space constraints, let us now move on to the 1960s. Never before had the cult of youth reached society so comprehensively. Fashion lost the elitist nature it once had for the benefit of democratization, to become a mass phenomenon. By the end of the decade, fashion was a vehicle for the transmission of political viewpoints. It later expressed sexual freedom, as opposed to the bashfulness of previous eras. In the 1960s, the first wave of designers materialized the new values promoted by rock, by the stars and youth that then became the fashion prototype. Young aesthetics, the cult of individualism and a new look at the elegance then prevailed. As Lipovetsky (1987: 142-143) emphasises, '(...) if individualist values made a critical contribution to the birth of haute couture at the outset, in a second phase they also lay behind the disaffection of its traditional clientele.'

The media contributed to the emergence of a mass and more hedonistic culture, driven by youth. Since the 1960s, fashion has been subject to a multitude of innovations, which accentuated from the 1980s as a result of globalization and increased consumption. According to Perniola:

‘(...) Our society has become polytheistic and pagan, not – as some people superficially believe – because one can now choose between so many commodities, parties and lifestyles, but because every commodity, party and lifestyle that wishes to present itself as a winner tends to assimilate, and even to incorporate, the features of all other competing commodities, parties and lifestyles’ (1994: 96).

Companies, by following an accelerated time, redefined their strategies to become more competitive in the market. The 1980s were marked by consumption frenzy, the cult of logomania, excess, partying, glamour, *fast fashion*, and by the discovery of fashion by investment funds and holding companies that changed the market rules.

Let us now focus, even if briefly, on the culture encouraged by the shopping malls, on the changes brought along by *fast fashion*, on the merging of marks by multinational corporations that hitherto had not yet ventured to enter the fashion arena, and on the new temples of consumption.

3. THE SHOPPING MALLS AS IMAGINARY UNIVERSES

To put it succinctly, the study of the emergence of shopping malls in Europe cannot be dissociated from the influence of department stores in Paris and London, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. However, we cannot disregard the fact that these originated in the United States, where a great progress in trade and industry, including small shops and department stores, had already taken place in the eighteenth century. A leap in time shows us that the great depression of the 1930s and 1940s delayed the maturation of this type of shopping. After World War II, suburban areas gained a new landscape. Some urban features were removed from the centre to the city outskirts, where shopping malls started multiplying as shopping and entertainment areas. The cities of New York, Boston, Philadelphia and Chicago were, according to Ketchum, ‘(...) gradually reprogrammed and redesigned’ (1948: 14.).

Between the 1950s and the 1960s, Europe, particularly the United Kingdom, France and Germany, imported the North American archetype of shopping malls – even if they then did not have the dimensions that they would later gain. In France, for example, the shopping malls originated in suburban districts, to where, after World War II, the city began to expand with a real estate offer that was able to attract people. However, North American size shopping malls did not open in France until the late ninety-sixties, as is the case of the Parly 2, for instance, located in the Versailles area. According to Baudrillard: ‘In the marriage between comfort, beauty and efficiency, Parlysiens discover the material conditions of happiness’ (...) (1995: 20).

Between the 1960s and the 1980s, the shopping malls have become the new temples of consumption that flourished simultaneously with the urbanization of peripheral urban areas. However, the relocation in outlying areas owed solely to operational matters. The 1980s, in particular, witnessed a new era with the construction of shopping malls in the city centres. This, however, did not equate with a decline in investment in the

peripheral areas. Rather, it was an effort to balance the city centres and the city outskirts. Shopping and leisure were combined in these areas, which increasingly became spaces of socialization. In fact, this trend later changed, so as to preserve traditional shops and simultaneously move the shopping malls off of city centres.

These spaces were in line with the new lifestyles: they were increasingly bigger, they had an avant-garde architecture, and they were equipped with complex and sophisticated infrastructures and constantly enhanced technology. Moisés Martins portrays the 'shopping mall' primarily as 'a technological show of images. Being a parable of our times, it is the parable of a time that is shaped primarily as an image' (2005: 54).

The shopping mall provides a multi-faceted offering, where a multitude of proposals are combined. As far as access is concerned, for example, everything is properly programmed. As to safety, everything is duly controlled. In short, the shopping mall is a megalopolis where everything is properly ordered. Not to forget that the shopping mall is an artificial, aseptic, perfect and controlled space. Being 'well supervised, properly watched and guarded, it is an orderly island, free of beggars, idlers, thieves and drug dealers' (Bauman, 2001: 114). It is a place of social segregation, where a policy of 'zero' condescension applies for the deviation from the order imposed. It is a paradise reserved only for the chosen few (Martins, 2002 a).

Since they are at the service of the consumers, shopping malls serve perfectly the designs of commercial success. And, so that nothing fails, everything is minutely planned, measured and translated into figures. In these consumption lieu, we are taken to another world: 'a place-no-place', in Bauman's terms (2001: 116), a 'non-place', in the thinking of Marc Augé (1992). This is a 'non-place' that disrupts our daily lives, leading us to a universe marked by the momentary, the transience, the excess and the superabundance. These spaces probably refer us to compensatory imaginary universes, in search for reconciliation with our inner contradiction. When we roam around these spaces, we have nothing to share with others who walk beside us. This is not a *rendez-vous* with the other, but rather an attempt to get rid of them (Martins, 2002 b: 352). We suppress this collective because our consumption experience is, most of all, individual. In other words, identifying in each entity an opportunity to live intensely is the only thing that matters. The promise of constant pleasure that breaks with the diversity and syncretism that guides our everyday life '(...) means that the perceptions of the doubly coded, playful, desires and fantasies lurk within the interstices of everyday life and threaten to irrupt into it' (Featherstone, 2001: 14).

Moisés Martins views the experience of going to the mall as a technically and aesthetically outfitted expedition and states: "(...) Being a libidinal and rhetorical space, it thoroughly engages our imaginary and reassures our narcissistic feeling by fulfilling the most obstinate of dreams, namely the abolition (...) of ordinary space and time" (2005:54).

The shopping mall is a Disneyland, both for adults and for children. Everything in there is programmed: well-being, functionality and pleasure. According to Bauman, '(...) we are bound to see and treat consumption as a vocation' (2008: 73). Thus, driven by the emotion and the desire to consume, we do not simply buy / enjoy products, but

simultaneously moments of leisure converted into goods. Consumption and leisure are one and the same thing. Adorno and Horkheimer critically analysed the 'mechanics' of domination in the Western world, where cultural industries seize the subjectivity of the subject. These thus play a decisive role in forging the needs that are directly related to consumption. Further to these authors, as cultural industries aim for the integration of the consumers, they cannot simply adjust their products to mass consumption. Most of all, they need to determine and define their own consumption. It can be stated that, the more compact 'the positions of the culture industry become', the more power it has to determine the 'consumers needs, producing them, controlling them, disciplining them, and even withdrawing amusement' (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2007: 157).

4. THE DESIRE TO BE ALWAYS ON-TREND: FAST FASHION

The term *fast fashion*, which originated by analogy with the term *fast food*, is used to refer to retail chains such as *Zara*, *H & M*, *Primark*, *Top Shop*, among others, which are governed by a process of speedy and relentless production, multiplication, distribution and selling, cost-effectively. This means that 'we are consumers of *McFashion*. Fashion has begun to resemble fast food: fast, disposable, (...) and homogeneous' (Lee, 2003: 63). This message is conveyed in simultaneous with contemporaneity, which is marked by restlessness and speediness. Like the rabbit of 'Alice in Wonderland', we are always rushing, constantly busy with the desire to be always on-trend. Bauman emphasizes that 'fashions come and go with mind-boggling speed, all objects of desire become obsolete and off-putting before they have time to be fully enjoyed' (2001: 186).

Let us focus very briefly on *Zara*, the star brand of the Spanish group *Inditex*. This gigantic empire is spread across the five continents, and is composed by nine different brands: *Zara*, *Pull & Bear*, *Massimo Dutti*, *Oysho*, *Bershka*, *Stradivarius*, *Zara Home*, *Zara Kiddy*, *Lefties* and *Urterqüe*.

Zara has become an archetype at a global scale, a case study, because of how it began to equate the entire process of design, production, distribution and sale, and which was based on a shorter time frame between the sale and the replacement of the mini-collections introduced in the market several times a week. In other words, the philosophy of the group consists of combining the distribution, production, merchandising and sales.

Until now, no other group has managed to overcome this model.

Therefore, consumers are greeted with new items, new mini-collections that are renewed in accordance with the most striking trends, in versions that are more or less affordable, when compared to the items in which they are inspired. In doing so, they attempt to reach a larger number of audiences. The connection '(...)' of the consumers with this type of mass distribution chains, looking for new items weekly or fortnightly, is based on a shift that involved re-educating the consumers to reject the old and enjoy the new' (Gama, 2012: 1150). This mode of operation in the market sets itself apart from the traditional model, which set the pace of the trends for the next season only every six months.

It aims to instill in the consumer the idea that if they find an item in *Zara* that is of interest to them, they have to buy it immediately. Otherwise, it may be sold out when they

next visit the shop. The ‘enjoyment of the present and the *carpe diem* become massive and undeniable values’ (Meffesoli, 1985: 32). This builds upon constantly fostering an environment of scarceness that suits well the instant purchase. The guaranteed success of ‘(...) *fast fashion* (...) is in selling an unprecedented amount of clothing’ (Cline, 2013: 101).

The group’s central services in Arteixo, La Coruña, systematically monitor the sales of certain clothing items. It is thus possible to know in real time how a certain item is selling, what appeals to customers and which trends contribute the most to consumers’ buying decisions. All information provided by the shops and subsequently processed allows them to determine which clothing items are to be produced and which ones are to be discontinued. *Zara* does not market pre-defined collections. It is based on the shop managers’ feedback about what appeals to consumers that decisions are made as to which items will continue to be produced.

Often, *fast fashion* brands are accused of plagiarizing *haute couture* brands and adapting the items to the market. *Zara*, however, ‘(...) rejecting this label, state that they seek (...) to observe the market trends and to meet the consumer’s desires’ (Gama, 2012: 1153).

But regardless of the changes that have been introduced, and of how they changed consumer habits, have these chains invented *fast fashion*? I suppose they haven’t. We have to go back in time and make a ‘short journey’ to the Parisian district of Sentier to realize that this phenomenon was not discovered by the *Inditex* Group or the *Hennes & Mauritz* *Wirdforss* Group.

Therefore, contrary to what is commonly believed, *fast-fashion* was not invented by *Zara* or *H & M*. On the contrary, its origin presumably lies in Sentier. In order to discuss Sentier, we have to go back to the Middle Ages. Very briefly put, the importance of this district is directly related to the development of the clothing industry and the *prêt-à-porter* in France, and more specifically in Paris. In the eighteenth century, Sentier was an area where fabrics were traded. But it was during the nineteenth century that it became famous for manufacturing affordable clothes in small plants. Chronologically, this district has been the focus of convergence of successive immigrant waves. In the 1960s, Sentier became the epicentre of fashion for the masses. This Parisian district has always been known for its ability to capture the signs of fashion. And what chains like *Zara* and *H & M* did was to enhance this system, via the so-called *Quick Response System*.

But this district entered an era of decay, since it could not compete with the major *fast-fashion* chains. It can, therefore, be stated that fashion does not have a high regard for its predecessors, since ‘(...) it is out of indifference (...) that Sentier is disappearing, precisely when their methods triumph’ (Erner, 2000: 119).

To conclude, strategically there is no company like *Zara*, ‘(...) so singly tuned with the consumer society that characterizes post-modernity, and that has behind the *Inditex* Group Amancio Ortega Gaona, a man who knew how to capture the essence of the coordinates of his time’ (Gama, 2012: 1155).

5. A NEW ORDER: THE ADDITION OF FETISH BRANDS

The 1980s started mirroring the progress of large holding companies, of mergers, acquisitions, the rampant increase in the licensing of the trademark system, and the emergence of new brands. It is worth noting that during this decade financial transactions in stock exchanges accelerated, as did all kinds of economic transactions, in real time. And these were accompanied by the dispersion of the products / brands that '(...) flow from one investment fund to another, and that (...) belong to other groups whose businesses are utterly unrelated to fashion, but which figured it as a way to expand the group, (...) as a profitable market' (Gama, 2013: 3). This decade also represented the era of structuring of brands, which were paired according to a set of increasingly effective marketing, advertising and public relations strategies. The status of the brand names is converted into icons.

The addition of a set of fetish brands, in the context of certain economic groups, is a recent phenomenon in the world of fashion and luxury, dating from the 1980s. Trading, buying, merging, centralizing and discontinuing seems to be the rule of this market that has very peculiar characteristics. In summary, we can conclude that there are three luxury conglomerates that dominate the market, trading on all fronts and bringing together a multitude of brands, products and services that are absolutely unrelated to fashion. These are the French group *Moët Hennessy & Louis Vuitton* (LVMH), the French group *Kering* and the Swiss group *Richemont*. The *Gucci* group, of Italian origin and whose major shareholder is the French holding (*Kering*), and the *Prada* group are holding companies of different characteristics, if we take into account the investments that they choose to make.

The 1990s mirror the 1920s, including measures related to the decrease in consumption and to a record unemployment rate caused by the economic crisis -- a likely result of the controversial neo-liberal paradigm. Paradoxically, this decade did not impede the emergence of brand acquisitions and the consolidation of large conglomerates of luxury brands.

In the new millennium, their success continues to rely, for example, on the investment in new hyper consumption cathedrals of stratospheric dimensions. These luxurious *Maisons* provide a mighty and intoxicating experience. The visitors feel like film stars.

The elite of the cathedrals of consumption is located in the main cities: Paris, Milan, Tokyo, New York and London. These luxurious *Maisons* of extraordinary dimensions offer a mighty and intoxicating experience. They provide an increasingly customized service that makes us feel unique: fascinating women and attractive men, distinct and smartly dressed, assist us with properly tuned graceful manners. Their smile is marked by circumspection, distance and, at the same time, involvement. 'We teach them how to sell', Pegler (1999: 3) claims. They speak softly, their gestures are subtle and their presence can hardly be noticed. They greet us in a kind of ritual of the chosen ones. We feel unique. We feel like characters of *One Thousand and One Nights*. The atmosphere is soaked with peculiar fragrances. The music is consistent with the type of area of the brand that it represents. The artworks are arranged in minutely studied places. An intoxicating atmosphere and exciting sets invite us to a dream and instill the look. All senses are summoned. We always refer to the sensations that these spaces attempt to inspire. I therefore argue that a series of devices are summoned in order to arouse emotions, encourage dreams and trigger the purchase.

Multinational corporations have realized that economically strong countries and emerging markets are an *El Dorado* worth investing in, and brands moved to other 'regions'. This is the ironic, melancholic, and yet realistic tone that François Baudot uses to provide an account of what is at play in an evolving market: above all, a new economic order that is governed globally. 'Businesses have become too serious to (...) be left only in the hands of fashion designers' (Baudot, 2008: 378). ✍

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