Fashion Victims: On the Individualizing and De-individualizing Powers of Fashion

Bjørn Schiermer

Bjørn Schiermer holds a PhD scholarship at the Department of Sociology, University of Copenhagen. He is working with fashion in a Simmelian and phenomenological perspective.
bsa@sociology.ku.dk

Abstract

This article discusses the popular notion of the “fashion victim.” It conceives of the notion of fashion victimization as an integral part of existence in modern individualized society. 1) Through analyzing different accounts of fashion victimization, I aim to distil a common phenomenological core extant in these experiences. As we will see, these experiences tell us a great deal about the individualizing and de-individualizing dynamics of fashion. 2) This analysis can be used, so I argue, to understand fashion as a sociocultural dynamic on its own terms. In so doing, I mean to isolate the most important elements of the experiences connected

to fashion dynamics, and thus create a phenomenological concept of fashion that captures all manifestations of fashion in society. 3) On the phenomenological level, the deciding factor is the *object*. It is through the experience of the fashionable object that the individualizing and de-individualizing powers of fashion are mediated.

KEYWORDS: fashion, fashion victim, phenomenology of fashion, object of fashion

Introduction

The term “fashion victim” is a popular term nowadays. It is also a term that emphasizes the social hazards of fashion dynamics as these are perceived by the great majority in contemporary Western society. The accounts of victimization place fashion and fashion objects within a broad sociological horizon from the outset. In these descriptions, the fashion *object* accrues a special importance. As we will see, it plays a crucial role as a mediator between the individualizing and de-individualizing powers of fashion. An understanding of the role of the fashion object and the changes it undergoes is of tantamount importance, since in contemporary aestheticized culture, social formations gather around objects in a shared examination of phenomenologies of victimization—i.e. around objects that *incarnate* the loss of individual autonomy and creativity on behalf of others and/or oneself.¹

The Concept of the Fashion Victim

Google lists a total of 956,000 hits for the term “fashion victim.”² The French, who have adopted the term—sometimes replacing the English “victim” with the French “*victime*”—are responsible for 244,000 of these hits. The Germans have their own concept of the “Modenarr” which translates to English somewhere in between a fashion “jester” and a fashion “fool.” It accounts for 1,140 hits. The more literal translation of “fashion victim” in German, “Modeopfer,” lists 6,300 hits, what might explain the fact that German pages only list 49,800 occurrences of the English term. The notion “Fashion victim” has a reference in the German and the English Wikipedia and in many popular English dictionaries. Though the term appears in the title of a scientific work by French sociologist Guillaume Erner (2006),³ it is most often found on the cover of numerous novels and thrillers in the genre of “airport literature,” in detective stories, or in comic strips. Furthermore, it is of prominent use in the growing genre of fashion literature for layman: books written by (or about) more or less famous people in the fashion business, who share with their readers their passion for clothing and for the glamour and

gossip of the “fashion world,” often contributing with first-hand testimonies and original thoughts.⁴ *Fashion Victim* is also the name of a disc (and a song) by French pop singer Loire, of a song by the American punk-pop group Green Day, and of yet another song by French pop-rock group Four Black Taxis. It is also the French translation of the name for the popular American film *Sweet Home Alabama* from 2002 (directed by Andy Tennant). Finally, the term also surfaces in Japanese photographer Kyoishi Tsuzuki’s famous exhibition of *Happy Victims*.⁵

The English journalist Nicholas Coleridge quotes John Fairchild, famous and feared editor of the fashion magazine *W*, for saying that the term “fashion victim” was coined by Oscar de la Renta (over dinner with Fairchild) (Coleridge 1988: 71). Fairchild, however, claims, in his autobiography *Chic Savages*, to be the one who “hatched” the term (Fairchild 1989: 89). Yet *who* invented the term is not as important as the question of *why* it has obtained its recent popularity. In fact, the term itself denotes nothing new. One may find texts displaying awareness of the excesses of fashion and its social dangers stemming from the late Middle Ages.⁶

What is sociologically significant in Fairchild’s contribution is rather that it represents a popularization or democratization of sensations and meanings connected with fashion, formerly reflected only by the nobility or (later) the bourgeoisie. In fact, his real merit may be his invention of the so-called *In and Out List*, the illustrated (annual) portraying of the “expensively misguided” (Fairchild 1989: 89), thus letting “normal” people wallow in the failed attempts of the better-off, enjoying the chocks and jolts of the excessive self-degradation of others. This display is the downside of glamour. Here, fascination and resentment come together in an ambivalent mixture. Yet this display also points toward new and postmodern phenomenological sensibilities, toward the popular cultivation of the sensibility for *camp* and kitsch, toward a form of tender irony joyously celebrating the “seriously failed.” Later, we shall see how the reflected or ironic love of “bad taste” is connected to the display of fashion victimization. First of all, though, we have to examine the experience of victimization in itself.

Accounts of Victimization

All the common notions of the fashion victim agree on one essential point: a fashion victim follows fashion—and in following is somehow led astray.⁷ This means, first of all, that we must stress the word *fashion*. Outside of fashion dynamics, there are no fashion victims. The notion of the fashion victim should be kept separated from the case of just dressing badly. Thus, for instance, the stars pinned on the magazine *People*’s annual wall of shame for “the most outrageously clothed stars” are not necessarily fashion victims. People that are indifferent to clothing

fashion do exist,⁸ yet when people look terrible out of indifference, it is because they have done too little rather than too much.

Thus, an essential trait of fashion victimization is the display of *excess*. The “Modenarr,” writes Simmel, does not merely obey fashion’s slightest hints or movements, but overdoes or exaggerates them: “When pointed shoes are fashionable, his shoes ends in lance tips, when high collars are fashionable, he will wear them up to the ears, when it is fashionable to witness scientific lectures, he is not to find any where else [than in the lecture room]” (Simmel 1995: 19).⁹ Fairchild, who “can’t stand fashion victims,” speaks about being “carried off to the wilder shores of fashion.” In his view, “bad fashion is when a woman exaggerates” (Fairchild 1989: 19). Michelle Lee, a fashion journalist who has dedicated an entire book to the thematic of fashion victimization, gives the following account of an encounter with a fashion victim:

She’d taken a whirl in the style blender, and it wasn’t pretty: [...] a sturdy redhead of about thirty-five, whose look reflected her apparent belief that the more trends you pile on your body the better. I counted four: detachable faux-fur collar, leather pants, multi-colored snakeskin boots, and the real showstopper, a sequined cowboy hat, all of which made for an amalgam on a par with taking different colors Play-Doh and mashing them together. Two tourists [...] snickered and pointed as she walked by. Now, that’s a fashion victim I thought as I passed her [...]. (Lee 2003: ix)

This is excess. Yet, what is just as important is that a fashion victim, of course, does *not* know she is being led astray. Thus, in Lee’s account, the fashion victim “slaps [her] own behind while howling, ‘I look good’” (Lee 2003: xi). The fashion victim is totally convinced of her own appearance. Consequently, what is interesting is not so much the aesthetical dimension (the sheer confrontation with something unsightly), but the sensation of some kind of *hubris* on the part of the victim. The problem is not *aesthetical*. These items are not simply ugly. They are hideous in a strikingly odd way. Fashion objects do not get old. They become “out of fashion” or even “out of date.” A distinct gaudy, cheap, and tacky phenomenology is attached to them. This is also evident from the fact that one might have the same sensation outside of clothing fashion: outdated slang might have the same odd feel to it, as might some symbolic or metaphorical locutions or styles of expression belonging to certain abrupt emerging (and disappearing) political, religious, scientific, or aesthetic ideologies. One might say that the notion of bad taste transcends aesthetics.

Of course this is no new thought to sociology. Pierre Bourdieu has with great success shown how the notion of “legitimate taste” functions as a tool of power used by the artistic elite to maintain their position in the “field” of cultural production (Bourdieu 2003: 60, 271ff.).¹⁰

Yet there is more to social *distinction* than the *degoût* of the taste of the lower classes. The trickle-down hypothesis was falsified long ago. Fashion dynamics are to a large extent set free from social *positioning* in Bourdieu's sense. What is at stake in fashion is rather a problem of *socio-existential* nature: in the eyes of the beholder, the fashion victim has lost himself to blind social dynamics incarnated in objects that are considered too common, overtly "fashionable," clichéd or stereotypical. Evidently, the fashion victim does not perceive that the venerated objects are in fact "mere fashion." He shows no distance to his objects and has a firm belief in his creative powers: he chooses his objects carefully and deliberately. He dresses up. His "work" is composed and put together in the conviction of an individual expression of his self. Yet he is led astray, "misguided," in the words of Fairchild. In fact, as it turns out, it is naked mimesis that guided the efforts from the outset. Exactly where the victim thinks himself authentic and creative, he excels in clichés and stereotypes. Where he thinks his creative impulses come from within, the spectator discovers a complete determination from without: fashion. The Green Day song *Fashion Victim* seizes this dimension. Indeed the "fashion victim" displayed here does not consider himself victimized. This is exactly what triggers the Green Day sarcasm. The blind obedience to the merry-go-round of fashion is seized in a coarse metaphor of a trained and servile dog which has no sense of its submission proper. The fashion victim is indeed "casually" dressed to the teeth. Even the small points of detachment, of "casualness" presumably displaying individual reserve, are subsumed under the directives of fashion. The notion of the fashion victim thus evokes a sense of existential irony: a fall. The more acute this fall is, the bigger the sensation on behalf of the spectator. However, in the Green Day song the degradation of the fashion victim merges with the resentment against the better off. Apparently, fashion victims are only to be found in the upper classes. Compared with Lee's description, the Green Day song has an ideological furnish that partly covers up the phenomenological dimension. Thus, going back to Lee, one clearly sees that there is an objective aspect to the chastisement of the fashion victim. Even though fashion victimization is an existential and not an aesthetical notion, it is triggered by certain *objects*:

The fashion victim is the balding small-town male hairdresser who pours himself into tight leather pants, wild imported silk shirts, and fluorescent-green alligator boots; the bulbous-bellied talk show guest in stripper-esque spandex [...]; the high school typing teacher still stuck in her disco youth with polyester lapel, mushroom-printed shirt, and high-waisted flares; the A-list actress who struts down the red carpet at the Oscars in a pair of unflattering bike shorts (somewhere in Idaho, Demi Moore is still embarrassed). We catch one glimpse of these misguided souls and can't help but proclaim them fashion victims. (Lee 2003: xi)

In fact, Lee's description is both broader in a socio-economical sense and far less pejorative than the one of Green Day. She does not so much tell people what to think as she does deliver to them a matter-of-fact listing of objects. That is enough. Irony works its best when it is tacit: implicit and shared. It has to be understood from within, which is why the somehow self-righteous rebuttal of "ironic arrogance" never goes without a certain amount of hypocrisy. It is through these objects that we catch a glimpse of a "misguided soul."

One might designate such lists of gaudy objects as "allegories of victimization." They are made for collective delight. A distanced but accurate research and remuneration of these dead cultural forms (and their "intertextual" correspondence with or proximity to other peculiarly failed forms) constitutes a possibility for indulging in shared experiences on behalf of the spectators; that is, between Lee and her readers.

Yet the sensation of victimization may spark reflection. Lee turns her scrutinizing gaze against herself. She continues:

[As] I continued my way, the question struck me: was I any better? I mentally scanned my outfit. [...] In the days and weeks that followed I began to realize that I—like everyone around me—was a fashion victim. I may not have been decked out in head-to-toe animal prints or swathed in huge designer decals, but I was just as guilty of bowing to fashion as the Play-Doh woman at the bank. (Lee 2003: x)

This turn to reflection contrasts with the Green Day attitude. Apparently the members of Green Day find themselves to be beyond such social dynamics. Fashion belongs "out there," in "commercial" or "materialist" society surrounding the enclave of the emancipated. Lee, having no such means of externalization at her disposal, becomes a glimpse of the tremendous social powers beneath her own existence:

A fashion victim is anyone who has ever looked back at old pictures and cringed—a reflex induced by the realization that fashion at some point in their lives had been able to manipulate their brain waves with some sort of Ninja-control. (Lee 2003: xii)

A dependence on social and temporal dynamics surfaces through the old photo. The individual senses the de-individualizing powers of fashion. Danish author Karen Blixen (alias Isak Dinesen) relates a similar shock coming back to Africa after a longer stay in Europe:

I have wondered why numb things placed aside in cupboards or on shelves, and in no way attacked by neither moth nor corrosion, in their unnoticed existence over the years suffer radical changes. I have seen it with my own dresses, bought in Europe

but left in the wardrobe in Africa, when I after two or three years, took them out to put them on, and they, without having stretched or shrunk, suddenly seemed to be too long or too short. They had not changed, and yet they were changed. Fashion and my own eyes caused this change. (Blixen 1951: 10)

Confronted with the objects fashion has left behind, our own exposure to the dynamics of fashion becomes visible. Suddenly our dependence on social and temporal dynamics, deeply influencing our desire, our gaze, and our taste, surfaces. Blixen would probably not have understood it, eccentric and aristocratic as she was, but this shock, along with the peculiar phenomenology of the objects that cause it, might constitute a possibility for new forms of sociality.¹¹ We are dealing with a sublime negative experience that has in itself become popular.

Hence, in a German fashion magazine of the kind that is freely distributed in cafes and bars in the big cities, I retrieved the confrontation with the old photo Lee talks about in the citation above. Under the headline “My biggest fashion sins,” a young German confesses his lack of autonomy in the face of fashion dynamics. The occasion is an old photograph showing him dressed to kill in (what is now) antiquated fashion. The photo reveals, as he writes, his “crimes of style [Stilverbrechen] in the year 1991.” However, after a playfully ironic listing of the marvelously shallow objects on the photo, reflection takes a deeper turn. The young man relativizes his guilt: “Do you know what? Society is to blame,” he writes. The fact that he was exposed to social forces he could not possibly control apparently takes the guilt off his shoulders. Yet he continues:

However, the realisation remains, that there exists no gene for good taste. Everybody must go through his own phases and catastrophes of fashion, before he can find his own style. Not even time travels help against these catastrophes.¹²

“Time travels” are not enough. Apparently one has to *live through* the proper lack of autonomy to regain it. One has to be a one-time victim to avoid further victimization.¹³ One time burned by the fire, one learns to keep ones distance. Yet to improve our understanding of the dialectic between individualization and de-individualization in fashion, we have to better discern the elements in play in the experience of victimization.

Individualization and De-individualization

Clearly we have come a long way from the *In and out* lists of badly dressed people in the fashion magazines or the tabloids. Yet a common

denominator remains. In all the above testimonies, the following factors remain constant: we have to do with excess, with fashion dynamics, with the intricate relation between individualization and de-individualization and, finally, we have to do with material or immaterial objects. This last factor I will leave aside for a moment.

The historic examples of what humans are willing to do with their bodies in the name of adornment are well known. The “exotic” commonplaces range from the bound feet of Chinese women and the neck-stretching rings of the Paduang tribe in Burma, to the clay or wood plate inserted in the lower or upper lip in some African tribes. In the occidental hemisphere we have seen the neck-stretching cutthroat ruff, the farthingale, and the corset, and, not to forget, tight jeans and stilettos.

What these examples teach is foremost that excess is a relational category.¹⁴ If everybody is excessive, no one is. If we insist on using the notion of fashion victimization discriminately, it has to testify to some kind of *individual* excess that transcends collective norms. This is what Simmel means when he tells us that the fashion victim “excesses in the tendencies of fashion, crossing the limit observed by others of his epoch” (Simmel 1995: 19). This also explains why there is something inherently discomfoting in deeming a gaily decorated girl of the Paduang tribe a fashion victim. Thus in pre-modern society, there was no need of attracting attention to the individual as an individual with a proper identity project. Collective identities and tradition ruled. The space for expressing individual aesthetic judgments was fairly limited, and particularly in the lower classes, since the actual material surroundings did not offer much for choice.

The modern sub- or counterculture represents a case in point. On the one hand the “traditional” protest subculture is short of *individual* overindulgence of cultural forms. Even though the subcultural regimentation takes place in an individualized culture, the room for individual expression *inside* the group is restricted. Inside the subculture, there are no fashion victims—not because there is too little mimicry, but because there is too much. In fact, the display of uniform subcultural excess often coincides with a strong collective pressure and the existence of a definite and clear-cut symbolic imaginary that alludes to more “primitive” religious societies. On the other hand and in contrast with tribal sociality, the modern counterculture often defines itself through an opposition to commercial fashion dynamics, which are considered the epitome of repression. These groups are, as Davis would have it, not outside of fashion, but *antifashion*.¹⁵ In reducing fashion to commercial clothing fashion existing outside in “capitalist” or “materialist” society, antifashion hides its own fashion character.¹⁶ This “externalization” explains why the counterculture does not conceive of its *own* uniformity in terms of fashion—and consequently why an unprecedented conformity is possible here. It is this externalization, this modern kind of *hubris*,

this absolute (but illusionary) confidence in the autonomy proper, that distinguishes fashion victimization from other forms of losing oneself: religious rites, military life or sporting action, and all kinds of mass events of staged or unstaged character.

Thus, it is no coincidence that popular wisdom teaches that one should keep a certain distance from fashion, representing it often as a “force” or even a form of coercion. A fashion victim, as we have seen, is an individual who negates his own individuality in the very act of exercising it. Simmel writes about the fashion victim [der Modenarr], that he “goes in front of every body else, yet follows in their path.” He radicalizes the “social demands of fashion” to a point “where it assumes the appearance [Anschein] of the individualistic and particular” (Simmel 1995: 19). He is, in other words, de-individualized to the extent that he stands out. He attracts attention, not because of his individuality, but because of its particularly pertinent negation.

Constructed as somehow nominalist ideal types, the fashion victim is in a sense the opposite pole to the schizophrenic. Like the fashion victim, the schizophrenic attaches himself to certain objects, yet in contrast to the *too well known* objects of the fashion victim, the objects of the schizophrenic have an exclusively private character. Only he knows their true meaning. The glimpse of such a radical individuality is shocking exactly because it transcends *all* social conventions for object choice. One cannot understand the schizophrenic. Concerning the fashion victim the case is the opposite: the beholder claims to understand the fashion victim better than the victim understands himself. Contrary to the victim’s belief, there is nothing of himself in his most precious objects. He does not select them himself. They are reducible to the social; to pure mimesis. However, of the two positions the one of the fashion victim is undoubtedly the less invalidating one. This might be the true meaning of the enigmatic Kantian proverb that it is better to be a fool *in*, than *out* of fashion (Kant 1983: 245).

As Simmel observes fashion has a Janus face in that it comprises both individuality and sociality (Simmel 1995: 9f.). However, these two moments can be contrasted more strikingly than Simmel proposed: *Fashion is at one and the same time a means for expressing ones individuality and the very power that threatens it.* All modern individuals have to navigate between these two poles, between the too fashionable and the idiosyncratic, between the Scylla and Charybdis of modern presentation of self. All authentic self-presentation takes place against a collective background that in a certain sense eats into this very same authenticity—we all know the slight sensation of embarrassment we experience when we suddenly become aware that we have expressed ourselves (sometimes deeply or sincerely) through certain (language borne) clichés. Of course one should avoid reducing all presentation of self, all work on Goffman’s *front stage*, to the display of

fashion. However, it is important to note that the tension between individuality and sociality, between pure mimesis and individual expression, between the loss and the gain of self, is particularly concentrated here. It is this tension that drives fashion. When pure sociality surfaces in certain “individual” expressions, these expressions are “contaminated” by fashion dynamics. Mimesis starts to introduce its presence. The objects become outdated, vulgar, trivial, and common; they lose their attractiveness and are soon abandoned. Accordingly, one has to find new objects through which one can represent ones individuality. What is at stake here—in a more or less conscious, more or less formulated form—is fashion victimization. It is the fear of victimization that makes us move. It is victimization that makes us stay. Thus the presence of victimization is not an *either/or*. It is rather to be understood on a gradual scale.

Analytically, however, as a methodological, so-called ideal typical construction, the sensation of victimization might still be conceived of as the *total* reduction of this or that cultural phenomenon to the social; the popularity of this or that object to pure mimicry. This clear-cut conception provides us with a distinct and sociological concept of fashion. As we will see, it also makes possible a better understanding of the relation between fashion and fashion dynamics in a modern, differentiated cultural environment. In this way I hope to avoid some of the typical pitfalls of fashion research.

Cultural Differentiation and Fashion Victimization

Even though transgressive attitudes do not pertain to fashion alone, no book about fashion passes over the dimension of excess—which is tightly coupled to the infamous irrationality of fashion.¹⁷ The French philosopher Gilles Lipovetsky describes the birth of fashion in the following terms:

At the same time the entire appearance of man tipped over in the regime of the theatrical, of seduction, of the spectacular and fantastic with the abundance of finery and frills, but also, and especially, with all its outré, extravagant and “ridiculous” forms: *poulaines*, shoes, conspicuous codpieces formed as penises, cleavages, the two-coloured costumes of the 14th and 15th centuries and, later on, enormous ruffs, *Rhingrave* plus-fours, farthingales, monumental baroque coiffures;—all these more or less eccentric fashions have to a different degree profoundly restructured the masculine and the feminine silhouette. Under the reign of fashion the aesthetical artificiality is not subjected to a stable order, but the principle proper of arrangement of attire. [...] Until then all “mannerist behaviour” was subjected to a structure stemming

from a common past. From then on, in contrast, it has become a *first principle* in the creation of forms. (Lipovetsky 1987: 40)

Lipovetsky has a justified intuition that we somehow feel the presence of fashion in “mannerist behaviour” and that this transgression must somehow be connected to modern individualism. One might say he repeats our young German’s testimony or Lee’s allegorical record of gaudy objects on a cultural-historical scale. It is the feeling of *having fallen victim to fashion*, unknowingly, that is synthesized in Lipovetsky’s many adjectives. There is something “ridiculous,” “theatrical,” “outré,” “baroque,” “artificial,” and “mannerist,” yet also something “adventurous” or even “marvelous” [*féerique*] about these objects that were once fashionable. They exude a lack of control in face of fashion dynamics, a renunciation of individual authority.

This phenomenology, however, appertains to fashion victimization and has nothing to do with any “aesthetical superficiality.” Lipovetsky is wrong on that point. In fact fashion has little to do with aesthetics at all.¹⁸ As is clear from the above citations of Blixen, Lee, and the young German, victimization can be a sublime negative experience (in the Kantian aesthetical sense) with existential dimensions. One has the same experience, albeit in a less intensive way, when one (resignedly) remarks on some intellectual matter or material object, that it was after all “mere fashion,” “nothing” but a “fad.”

It is this socio-existential negativity that *distinguishes* fashion from other kinds of motivations and temptations. This is what Simmel means when he says that fashion shows itself:

[...] when the independence from all other motivations becomes positively sensible, like our moral actions first counts as really moral, when they are motivated, not by external form or matter, but solely by the fact of duty. (Simmel 1995: 13)

Like the distinct “voice” of pure reason in Kantian ethics, fashion has its *own* voice—even though we only retrospectively hear its grin.

Concerning motivation, fashion motivations can be separated from motivations pertaining to sexuality, politics or power, religiosity, ethics, love, art, or economics. However, evidently, fashion dynamics can force themselves onto these institutions or be exploited more or less deliberately by them. Yet, in contrast to fashion all these institutions possess their own forms of rationality in the empirical sense of the word: there are *de facto* reasons and reasoning, there are so-called justification regimes, there is a history of ideas, semantics, and elaborate discourses attached to them.¹⁹ In other words, there is culture—and, in opposition to fashion, these cultural forms or institutions are *not* reducible to pure (unconscious or unreflected) social needs.²⁰ It is in contrast to *all* conventional measures, conventions, and values that fashion makes

itself felt as irrational, fortuitous, groundless, and unpredictable. The presence of fashion in culture indicates an *external* determination of the cultural object, which taunts all “good” reasons, all sound judgment on behalf of the individual.

In tending towards reducing clothing to fashion dynamics, Lipovetsky makes a second mistake.²¹ In no way can one maintain, as Lipovetsky does, that excessive or “mannerist” behavior determines modern clothing altogether or constitutes its “first principle.” Clothing is, just like so many other phenomena in our modern “culturalized” environment, a common battleground and a meeting place for different values and motivations, whose internal antagonisms, alliances, and reciprocities can be hard to figure out. Fashion represents, as we have seen, just one of these motivations. Certain beautiful dresses or fabrics might be fashionable. But what they display of beauty or luxury in their form, design, or material, they do not owe to fashion and it is still there to be rediscovered when the object goes out of fashion—which is why certain artworks, fabrics or dresses might become elevated to status of “classics.”²² One may avoid fur out of ethical reasons or one might dress up sexily. One may wish to carry a T-shirt with a certain slogan for purely political reasons. In that case, the behavior has nothing to do with fashion.²³ The distinct seduction or motivation pertaining to fashion alone stands out only to the degree that it disregards or overrules other more or less inherent and objective demands of functional, practical, hygienic, sanitary, economical, moral, political, sexual, or, of course, esthetical nature—values or motivations that are normally expressed or communicated in clothing and that *always* co-determine its form and appearance.

Yet fashion constitutes a very peculiar form of motivation compared with the values found in other institutions: fashion might *hide*. The case of antifashion, touched upon above, illustrates in a pertinent way how fashion dynamics might set themselves through to the extent that they remain unperceived. On the one hand, fashion might “colonize” or pervade other cultural institutions and yet remain unseen; disguise itself in currents or works of scientific or artistic nature, in political or religious ideologies. On the other hand, fashion *shows* itself precisely where it *formerly* did hide. As we have seen, objects “attacked” by fashion age differently than other objects.

This explanation, though, raises more questions than it answers: *how*, exactly, does fashion hide? And if fashion constitutes a distinctive force or motivation in itself, why did we not realize this? How did fashion seduce us into thinking there *was* an aesthetical, a functional or a political justification behind our desire for or our fascination by certain objects? How does the spell of fashion exercise itself for those that come too close? To really understand the seductive powers of fashion, we have to move closer to the phenomenology of the fashionable object.

Objects in Fashion

Even if Simmel does not apply the notion himself, what he tells us is that fashion is fetishism pure. He portrays fashion as the only “motivation” in modern culture without an *objective* correlate. Again, the ways of fashion are slippery and unpredictable. No fashionable object owes its fashionable character to any inherent properties. On this background, the occasional renunciation on all parameters of quality, or the neglect of utility or comfort often remarked on behalf of clothing fashion, makes good sense. Consequently, as we have seen, in the case of the fashion object, the fetishist relation *shows* in retrospect. We realize, in Blixen’s words, that it is (was) all in the eyes of the beholder. The young German told us that society is to blame.

Thus, in a sense, fashion has nothing to do with objects—it can be regarded as a kind of exploitation of culture by the social. Other sociologists would add that fashion objects are *signs* of social affiliation, of distinction, of the place occupied in “social space” by the individual and his peers. They are right, of course.

Yet fashion has everything to do with objects. It is the object that one perceives and it is by the object that one is seduced. To the seduced, sociological anti-fetishism or “socio-economism” is reductionism of the worst caliber. There is nothing instrumental or calculated about his relation to the object. To him it is no sign. His love is real. Thus, *speaking phenomenologically*, we do not find this or that object attractive, because we want to be a part of a certain group. Rather we want to be part of a certain group, because we desire the objects associated with this group of people.²⁴ The love for the object, Erving Goffman tells us, is a *precondition* for all sincere *front stage* work. In short: in the presentation of self, one chooses objects that oneself finds attractive.²⁵

Simmel does not explain how particular objects—objects *in* fashion—attain their sudden ephemeral prominence. The same goes for my account. We rest on a purely phenomenological level: I am not pretending to *explain* the real miracle of fashion, that is, *how* social relations and energies are projected unto things. Yet a mysterious interchange between sociality and materiality is taking place. The social relations are *incarnated* in the object. In a certain sense they hide behind it. As we have seen, the precondition for all fashion victimization is that one is not aware of one’s participation in the fashion circus. Sociologist Stanley Lieberman delivers a personal deliberation:

My wife and I are a conventional couple; when our first child was born, we gave her a name. Although we didn’t know it, other parents were choosing the same name for their daughters. We found out soon enough, though, from nursery school on, our Rebecca almost invariably encountered peers with the same name. What intrigued me was that neither me nor my wife had any idea that

we were picking such a popular name. We and these other parents were “independently” reaching the same decision at the same time. (Liebersohn 2000: xi)

Asked to justify the name given to their offspring, parents might deliver an account of the acoustic or aesthetical qualities of the name they have chosen; they might talk about their child, about stories of the Old Testament or the Koran, about family ties, tradition, or about the constellation of stars—maybe even about sheer chance or idiosyncratic affections. They are never going to say they chose this or that name *because* it was fashionable—probably such knowledge would even have the opposite effect. Fashion is no God we consciously worship.

Thus for the seduced, the object is not even “fashionable” or “in,” but rather “chic,” “cool,” “hip,” etc. The parents did unknowingly—or “independently”—chose a name in fashion.²⁶ They fell in love with an object only to discover *later* the fact that fashion lurked in its shadow. Even the advertisements in the fashion magazines do not sell their clothes by literally prescribing that these objects are to be worn because they are “in fashion,”²⁷ but deliberately seek to highlight the individualizing pole of fashion: “choose your own style!,” “You are unique!,” are some of the usual exclamations. Yet this externalization would remain totally abstract, virtual, and impossible, were it not for the fashionable *objects*. Things have to speak for themselves without overtly pointing back to the social, to “mere fashion”; they have to be attractive on their own, and sometimes, of course, artistic photographing, glamour, and glossy paper help them to do just that.

Simmel remarks that “in some sense every fashion appears as it would live forever” (Simmel 1995: 33). The ephemeral nature of the fashionable object—its fashion character, one might say—is only accessible in retrospect or in reflection. One sees the object *through* the shine of fashion. Fashion *naturalizes* what it *denaturalizes*; its conspicuousness is inconspicuous.

This fetishist dynamic concerning the object *in* fashion is the prerequisite for the mediation of sociality and individuality. It is through the object that the paradox of fashion is constantly acted out inasmuch as it is the fashionable object that keeps the two poles of fashion apart: the quest for individuality on the one side and pure imitation on the other. The imitative and distinctive sides are overshadowed by the object. This is particularly evident regarding the uniform subculture: in a certain sense uniformization *is* nothing but the shared (and somewhat ritualized) love for certain objects. It is this love for the objects that hinders subcultures in seeing that they are often more uniform than the “conformist” society they despise. Thus, the closer one gets to the fashionable object, the more fashion as such externalizes itself. The more one succumbs to fashion, the less one sees it. It is this dialectic

that constantly provokes excess and exaggeration. It is this dialectic that lurks behind all fashion victimization.

Perspectives

This account clearly stands in opposition to other more postmodern or voluntaristic ways of portraying fashion and its social dynamics.²⁸ In my view, we do not *choose* to follow fashion. If we did, we would simply have no such experiences as Blixen, Lee, or the young German had, which, I trust that most of us do. The day that people freely choose their objects without imitational bias would simply be the end of fashion as a social dynamic. In this perspective a lot of postmodern thinking ends up in an unholy alliance with traditional sociological accounts of a more or less utilitarian nature overemphasizing, when not the rationality of the individual, then at least his or her autonomy of choice.

Mainstream critical sociology makes other mistakes. One needs just to think of the unconditionally most popular clothing items of the last century—jeans and sneakers—to falsify the trickle-down hypothesis.²⁹ The autonomous rein of fashion dynamics does not signal the nearby disappearance of economical inequalities, but it signals the ongoing differentiation between the cultural and the socio-economical.

In disregarding the (experience of the) *fashion object*, both postmodern and “critical” sociology miss out on one of the most intricate relations of sociality and individuality in contemporary society. By insisting on the Janus face of fashion and by developing a phenomenology that shows how the two sides of fashion interact, collide, or reinforce one another, one does not just reach a better understanding of what fashion is, but one also creates a tool by which to navigate between superficial “bricolage” theories (of identity) on the one hand and materialist and determinist reproduction theories on the other.

To understand, for instance, what goes on in the precarious identity formation processes belonging to contemporary youth culture, new theorizing and new phenomenological insights in the domain of fashion are necessary. In these forms of sociality the phenomenology of the fashion object, the changes it undergoes, the experience of excess and perdition synthesized in the energies of the old and outdated, come together. One may speak of a popular decadence inasmuch as the phenomenology of victimization plays an important role in contemporary popular “retro” or “second-hand” fashion and design—as it does in *haute couture* by designers such as Jean Paul Gaultier and Franco Moschino.³⁰ In a way Fairchild’s *In and Out* lists anticipate the “ironic consumption” of the so-called “pomo,” the postmodern consumer who, in C. J. Thompson’s words, “celebrates [...] cultural abominations as the absolute ephiphanic apogee of awfulness” (Thompson 2000: 133–4).³¹ The popular

testimonies by Lee and the young German point in the same direction: the *camp* sensibility—itself a former subcultural phenomenon of the gay community—is now an appreciated popular phenomenology.³² Subtle irony, allegoric enumeration of the wonderfully tacky objects and the distanced and aestheticized examination of dead cultural forms, of clichés and stereotypes that others use without caution, are the point of departure for new forms of sociality.

The dialectic of victimization points back at an individualized society—and shows at the same time how structuring social dynamics survive and prosper in individualized culture. By deepening our understanding of the individualizing and de-individualizing processes of fashion and by interrogating the fact that it is now the experience of these processes themselves, attached to certain objects, that constitutes the popular attraction of a lot of contemporary cultural phenomena, one is able to create a more nuanced picture of the late modern interplay between sociality and culture. In a time where sociality and culture seem to grow ever further apart, it is the job of the sociologist to insist on the continual importance of the social. This does not mean, however, insisting that nothing new has happened, and that under the thin varnish of culture the old schemes of *habitus*, status or class are still exerting the determining power. It rather means that an up-to-date sociology of fashion needs to focus concretely on the phenomenological interplay between sociality and materiality. We need to understand better how social “energies” or relations are invested in objects, furnishing them with peculiar and changing appearances. We need to understand better how fashion dynamics contribute to the ongoing aestheticization of culture, of everyday life and everyday objects, before we can really understand the emerging popular sensibilities and forms of sociality that gather around these objects.

Notes

1. The article draws loosely on a Heideggerian phenomenological tradition. The point of departure for this analysis, however, is not so much the idea that the complex and strongly ambiguous experiences in the face of fashion and fashion dynamics tend to get “covered up” by a kind of “everydayness,” by a certain transparency due to triviality and self-evidence, but Heidegger (1993: §11) rather that the richness and the tensions conserved in popular attitudes towards fashion are in fact covered up or forgotten by fashion research—yet are still there to catch if one takes these accounts (of victimization) seriously on their own terms. As we will see, the experience of fashion victimization might be a shocking, strong, and pregnant experience.
2. The search was made on the March 21, 2008.

3. Erner's book is a good book on fashion, but a bad book on fashion victims, inasmuch as he almost denounces the very idea of an unconscious victimization. See for instance Erner (2006: 195).
4. The last goes without doubt for Fairchild (1989), Coleridge (1988), Lee (2003), or Agins (1999).
5. Tsuzuki has photographed some thirty individuals, whose all-consuming interest in life is the collection of items of particular fashion designers.
6. In fact, as is well known in fashion theory, the German concept of the "Modenarr" was already used by German philosopher Immanuel Kant in 1798 (Kant 1983: 245). We shall return to Kant later on.
7. I do not attempt to deliver any methodological overview over the many hits on Google. It is my feeling, however, browsing the hits, that for laypeople the fashion victim term connotes *foremost* to excessive spending due to an infatuation with clothing fashion and/or to the piling-up of branded clothes and accessories on the body in an ostentatious way. The clothing fashion victim is probably a particularly illustrative case of victimization—yet, as we will see, in no way the sole instance.
8. This is at least the opinion of Fred Davis (1992: 161).
9. All translation of German and French citations into English by the author.
10. Or he "deconstructs" philosophical aesthetics against the background of an "empirical interest," reducing pure aesthetics to the ideological maintenance of social distinction. See Bourdieu (2003: 565ff).
11. In French surrealism one finds clear anticipations of the postmodern taste for the objects that fashion has left behind. André Breton is fascinated by the obsolete and *démodé* in his book *Nadja*. See, for instance, Breton (1998: 55). Walter Benjamin (1980), exploring Paris in the footsteps of the surrealists, addresses explicitly the enormous "energies" emanating from the unfashionable.
12. The name of the fashion magazine is *IQ-Style* (August 2005: 17).
13. This problematic echoes (on a personal level) some of the more historical philosophical themes in the theory of fashion. All differences aside, both Walter Benjamin (himself echoing Karl Marx) and French culture philosopher Gilles Lipovetsky operate with a Hegelian dialectic: the figure of a negative detour that ends up in the affirmative. In Benjamin's account, the sheer acceleration of fashion dynamics will in itself give rise to a popular awareness of the emptiness of fashion phenomena. Thus, people will see that fashion is finally nothing but the Eternal Recurrence of the Same; they will understand their lack of autonomy in the face of sociocultural dynamics—and may act thereupon. See for instance Benjamin (1974: §29). Lipovetsky goes so far as to speak of "the cunning of the irrationality of fashion" (Lipovetsky 1987: 19). In his account fashion dynamics end up serving

democracy, individuality, and enlightenment. See, for instance, Lipovetsky (1987: 16f.). Like it happens on the personal level for our young German, fashion ends up annulling or eroding its own seductive powers. It somehow falls prey to its proper strength; it sparks reflection. Of course a thorough discussion of this problematic cannot be carried through in this article.

14. See also Wilson (1987: 57ff.)
15. And consequently remains dependent on “mainstream” fashion through some symbolic devise of “opposition, rejection, studied neglect, parody, satirization etc.” (Davis 1992: 161).
16. The clichéd statements are abundant, and when Fairchild explains to the reader that “[there] really aren’t any authorities and no one—expert or not—should tell you what is right to wear or what is fashionable” (Fairchild 1989: 156), this statement could just as well have come from the singer in Green Day. As Davis remarks, the antifashion attitude even prevails in the fashion world itself. See Davis (1992: 148).
17. See, for example: Wilson (1987: 13ff.), Simmel (1995: 12–13), Esposito (2004: 17, 134) and Blau (1999: 62).
18. It cannot be emphasized enough that fashion and aesthetics have to be kept analytically apart. Simmel has already remarked that fashionable objects can be hideous (Simmel 1995: 13). The popularity of certain “hyped” artworks might be due to fashion dynamics alone—and thus has only little to do with art. Conversely, the true beauty of some *haute couture* creations has only little to do with fashion dynamics, yet a lot with aesthetics. See note 21.
19. There are only so many ways of constructing our world—corresponding to the cultural out-differentiation of so-called “value spheres” [*Wertsphären*]. This is a theme in Neokantian philosophy from Heinrich Rickert to Weber and Simmel, but also a founding thought in newer (German) systems theory. In contrast to Simmel, Weber does not mention fashion as a separate value sphere. Likewise, the status of fashion as a “functional system” or as a “symbolic generalized medium” is still an issue of controversy in systems theory. See for instance Luhmann (1984: 74f.), Esposito (2004: 171), and Schmidt (2007: 46ff.).
20. Also in matters of art there is a vocabulary for legitimating one’s judgments. In fashion there is no such thing. Thus, Erner is right when he comments that “[...] there is a tradition and there is classics allowing to distinguish between the summer pop-hit and an opera by Mozart. In fashion matters an equivalent seems impossible to find” (Erner 2006: 97). Again, fashion is the sole cultural phenomenon totally reducible to the social. It is “a mere result of social needs,” as Simmel writes (Simmel 1995: 12).
21. Albeit his reservations, Erner tends towards the same mistake. He mistakenly criticizes Simmel’s paragraph about the “independence”

of fashion cited above, misconstruing Simmel's argument as if *Simmel* spoke about the absolute rule of fashion in *clothing* (Erner 2006: 106). But in this context Simmel does not talk about clothes. Simmel does not mean that clothing is determined solely by fashion (or even foremost by fashion). Actually, *haute couture* might have more to do with art than with fashion. Some of the biggest clothing designers show a remarkable aversion to the concept of fashion. Even Paul Poiret wanted to be considered as an artist. See Svendsen (2005: 92). For similar utterances from Issey Miyake and Rei Kawakubo, see Frankel (2001: 35, 160). See also the English fashion designers interviewed by Angela McRobbie (1998: 6f.). Fashion is first and foremost a social dynamic, imposing itself on almost all cultural domains—and in no way exclusively in clothes. In this perspective, analyses of how the creations of *haute couture* mirror the times, of its representations of women, of the sexes, or of ethical or political agendas, miss what is distinguishing *fashion* from a lot of other cultural phenomena. On the one hand such studies tend to reduce the notion of fashion to the notion of clothing. On the other they study fashion clothing just like they examine the products of any other cultural institution (the arts, the media or the “culture industry,” etc.).

22. Or in Erner's words: “Sure, The model *Corolle* from New Look, presented by Christian Dior himself in 1947 was sublime. But even if the dress is still as beautiful as then, it is not fashionable anymore” (Erner 2006: 98).
23. The example of “conspicuous consumption” is illustrative for this interplay between fashion and other motives or standards of value. Fashion might articulate itself in forms of conspicuous consumption, yet fashion is not reducible to pecuniary show-off. First of all, there is a wealth of fashions outside the reach of economic mediation. Secondly, even if we limit ourselves to the fads mediated by the market, sheer economical value does not coincide with “fashion value.” The example of second-hand fashion clearly falsifies Veblen's statement that “the requirement of expensiveness is so ingrained into our habits of thought in matters of dress, that any other than expensive apparel is instinctively odious to us” (Veblen 1970: 119). Dress is *not* simply an expression of pecuniary culture, just as it is not just an expression of fashion dynamics—which does not exclude, however, that it *may* be fashionable to carry expensive apparel. See also Erner, who refutes Veblen on the basis of empirical scrutiny. Erner concludes: “To the extent that things become fashionable, their prices fall” (2006: 182).
24. “People adopt a new model to be ‘in fashion’ rather than to emulate prestige groups,” Herbert G. Blumer notices (1968: 343).
25. The objects belong to the “setting.” See Goffman's account (1999: 22).

26. Or at least some of them did. The existence of fashion in names is notorious and much more independent of external instigation through the names of movie stars or other celebrities, as is normally held. Nobody controls fashion. See for instance Lieberman account on the name *Marylin* (Lieberman 2000: 230ff.). See also Erner (2006: 96).
27. Barthes discovered that the concept of fashion has a very limited use in fashion magazines. Barthes distinguishes two kinds of utterances. The first class (A) “mask[s] fashion behind a reason”; it rationalizes fashion under a function (Barthes 1983: 297). The second class (B) sticks closer to factual descriptions of the fashionable object—here fashion only turns up as an “implicit signified” (Barthes 1983: 52). In both cases, however, the concept of fashion is “almost always absent” (Barthes 1983: 37, note).
28. Lipovetsky’s rhetoric is typical in this aspect: “The commanding imitation [...] has given way to a flexible and voluntary imitation. One imitates, who one wants, how one wants” (1987: 169). Taken at face value this account excludes fashion altogether. The idea of an individualized fashion is a contradiction in terms.
29. Or more recently on the styles of rappers, skaters, and ravers. The shaved cut of skinheads is now mainstream; the same goes for the baggy pants of “gangsta” rappers. In fact, the group Green Day is just another example of a subcultural phenomenon turned mainstream. Green Day’s disc *Dookie* reached number two on the US Billboard. Anyhow, this development has not made Green Day slacken on the subcultural attitudes—which undoubtedly has contributed to their popularity.
30. Jean Paul Gaultier: “I adore the blonde, but first of all the false and oxidised blonde. [...] Definitely I am for all that is false or outré.” The citation is from Erner (2006: 39). This sensibility is equally to be found in Versace and Dolce & Gabbana, and in the personal collections of Galliano. Concerning the taste for decadence, one may think of the *fin-de-siècle*-inspired fashion of the late 1990s of John Galliano (for Dior) and Alexander McQueen (for Givenchy).
31. Thompson speaks of a form of “post shopping,” where consumers seek out “the most tasteless, gaudiest, and splendidly tacky artefacts they can find [...]” (Thompson 2000: 134). See also Belk (1997: 22ff.).
32. The classic text about camp is of course Sontag (1999). See also Bech (1997: 123f.).

References

Agins, Tery. 1999. *The Death of Fashion: How Marketing Changed the Clothing Business Forever*. New York: HarperCollins.

- Barthes, Roland. 1983. *Système de la mode*. Paris: Editions du Seuil.
- Belk, Russel W. 1997. "Been There, Done That, Bought the Souvenirs: Of Journeys and Boundary Crossing." In S. Brown and D. Turley (eds) *Consumer Research: Postcards from the Edge*, pp. 22–45. New York: Routledge.
- Bech, Henning. 1997. *When Men Meet*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Benjamin, Walter. 1974. "Zentral Park." In *Gesammelte Schriften*, Band 1.2. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag.
- Benjamin, Walter. 1980. "Der Surrealismus. Die letzte Momentaufnahme der europäischen Intelligenz." In *Gesammelte Schriften*, Band 2.1. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag.
- Blau, Herbert. 1999. *Nothing in Itself: Complexities of Fashion*. Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Blixen, Karen. 1951. *Daguerreotypier*. Copenhagen: Gyldendal.
- Blumer, Herbert G. 1968. "Fashion." In David L. Sills and Robert K. Merton (eds) *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*. United States of America. New York: Crowell Collier and Macmillan.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 2003. *La distinction*. Paris: Les Editions de Minuit.
- Breton, André. 1998. *Nadja*. Paris: Editions Gallimard.
- Coleridge, Nicholas. 1988. *The Fashion Conspiracy*. London: William Heinemann.
- Davis, Fred. 1992. *Fashion, Culture and Identity*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Erner, Guillaume. 2006. *Victimes de la mode: Comment on la crée, pourquoi on la suit*. Paris: Editions La Découverte.
- Esposito, Elena. 2004. *Die Verbindlichkeit des Vorübergehenden: Paradoxien der Mode*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag.
- Fairchild, John. 1989. *Chic Savages*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Frankel, Susannah. 2001. *Visionaries: Interviews with Fashion Designers*. London: V&A Publications.
- Goffman, Erving. 1999. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York: Anchor Books/Doubleday.
- Heidegger, Martin. 1993. *Sein und Zeit*. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag.
- Kant, Immanuel. 1983. *Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht*. Ditzingen: Reclam.
- Lee, Michelle. 2003. *Fashion Victim: Our Love–Hate Relationship with Dressing, Shopping, and the Cost of Style*. New York: Broadway Books.
- Lieberson, Stanley. 2000. *A Matter of Taste: How Names, Fashions, And Culture Change*. New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press.
- Lipovetsky, Gilles. 1987. *L'empire de l'éphémère*. Paris: Editions Gallimard.
- Luhmann, Niklas. 1984. "Udo. H. A. Schwarz, Das Modische." In *Soziologische Revue* 7: 73–4.

- McRobbie, Angela. 1998. *British Fashion Design: Rag Trade or Image Industry?* London: Routledge.
- Schmidt, Doris. 2007. *Die Mode der Gesellschaft: Eine Systemtheoretische Analyse*. Baltmannsweiler: Schneider Verlag Hohengehen GmbH.
- Sontag, Susan. 1999. "Notes on 'Camp.'" In Fabio Cleto (ed.) *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject*, pp. 53–65. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Simmel, Georg. 1995. "Die Philosophie der Mode." In *Gesamtausgabe*, Band 10. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag.
- Svendsen, Lars Fr. H. 2005. *Mode: Et filosofisk Essay*. Århus: Forlaget Klim.
- Thompson, Craig J. 2000. "Postmodern Consumer Goals Made Easy." In S. Ratneshwar, D. G. Mick and C. Huffman (eds) *The Why of Consumption: Contemporary Perspectives on Consumer Motives, Goals, and Desires*, pp. 120–39. London and New York: Routledge.
- Veblen, Thorstein. 1970. *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. London: Unwin Books.
- Wilson, Elisabeth. 1987. *Klædt i drømme*. Copenhagen: Tiderne Skifter.