

The Misplacement of Shame

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"Lisa, tonight is very important. Mommy has to alter her suit so it looks like a totally new suit."
- Marge Simpson, in Scenes from the Class Struggle in Springfield

Whereas western society at large in our day and age certainly wouldn't seem in need to fabricate motives in order to feel shameful, a very familiar, relatively recent, yet barely explicable occurrence when we do so is at best futile, and most often downright detrimental to the ever more topical health of the planet. Shame -or the relative lack thereof- in regards to fashion and sustainability has often been looked at from the point of view of a designer's more or less questionable production choices, or in a broader context in relation to nakedness, then through subcultures, to the subversion of established values and virtues. But I would argue that the shame everyone perceives when repeatedly seen wearing the same outfit, is ultimately and essentially what holds back the progress of sustainability in this industry.

Let's try to trace this curious phenomenon back to its origins. Historically, luxury came with needless excess: gowns with an inexplicable array of pleats, the "*vastly unnecessary flaps*" of lapels, according to Bernard Rudofsky, could also apply to both collars and cuffs. Today, luxury comes in a finer, more effortless and minimal form. That source of envy that luxury is, and is meant to be, has been in recent seasons' press releases and reviews more and more often paired with the term *unassuming*. Invisible elegance, humble, unpretentious, ordinary, indiscernible elegance - yet excess is nowadays just as present as it were in royal courts, if not more so. And it still is an excess of quantity, too: if our conscience now demands to be trained to the sustainable appeal of vegan fibers and all that's bio, we're still anachronistically ashamed to be seen, twice, by the same people wearing the same clothes. Surely this was no concern in the post-war era, surely no concern of the revolutionary youth - if rather novel in time, however, it's deeply rooted. It makes us blush. We respond to an uncomfortable, unpractical, self-imposed rule, and the whole of our seasonal industry, of high street turnovers, of our wardrobes and sense of what's proper have shifted to accommodate and profit from this perceived need.

This isn't a teenager's perusal of styles in order to find the one that suits them best. It isn't justifiable as occasional insecurity, self-indulgence nor ritual. As no one would be hurt, nor realistically offended, if we were to wear the same ensemble consequently once and again in their presence, this is but an obsolete, simplistic display of squander that should have no place in a perceptive society, yet can be found, equally, on every step of the price ladder.

Since it's not at all just confined to luxury, but quite the contrary: buying astonishingly more than we need prevents us to form any kind of affective bond to that which we wear, therefore seemingly requires no commitment - except, that it fuels the necessity to buy cheap. Buying cheap, in turn, allows us to buy ever more, to discard ever more yet perceive ourselves above reproach. It could be quick, and is hardly ever wrong to blame consumerism, but it's in the customer's self-perception that fast-fashion relies, and the particular influence of shame (other than, say, a much more productive guilt) as a defining factor in our behavior and morals is a quasi-exclusive peculiarity of the clothing industry. As Simmel puts it, perhaps a touch dramatically, when musing on fashion's fortuitous *breaches of modesty*: "*The feeling of shame is eradicated in matters of fashion, because it represents a united action, in the same way that the feeling of responsibility is extinguished in the participants of a crime committed by a mob, each member of which, if left to himself, would shrink from violence*". In our particular case, however, such vivid comparison might not be as far off the mark as it could appear at first glance: when waste is seen as a crime, as it should be from an environmental standpoint at least, fashion in general would have to plead guilty. The concerted nature of the offense allows us not to feel embarrassed, and yet we would, paradoxically, when not taking part in the same - hereby misplaced, we find our shame again.

How to fix this now? As any addiction, it's hard to forgo. We are used to a certain amount of choice in our wardrobes - to find ourselves with less, no matter how much we had before or have at present, can be a bit like experiencing once again those first few months of the economic crisis. Instead of the sense of pride that comes with a good deed, or even simply, somehow more selfishly, when we decide not to go for a second piece of cake, what we feel is irritated, unfulfilled, or miserable. While we may, even consciously, feel vaguely ashamed of our superfluous shopping, in a sort of bizarrely misguided Lady Macbeth effect, clean, proper new clothes seem to calm our troubled souls. *New clothes*, specifically, are the terminology of purification. There where we should encounter shame, once again, there's absolution.

A first easy step, perhaps, could be trying to remember what those around us wore the last time we've seen them: we'll find that we cannot quite recall. As relying on appearances as our society might be, we've a penchant to overestimate the impact of our impression on others. Next, a swift gathering of discarded price tags on our wardrobe floor might confirm that the sum of all those allegedly convenient deals would have allowed us to purchase, for the same amount, with little patience and a clear conscience, that considerably higher-end product we had thought out of our reach. Rediscovering long-term commitment, too, could be romantic: we're none of us immune to the tempting lure of discounted sequins, but if we give ourselves the chance to build memories and grow attached to what we wear, a new layer of warmth might just happen to surprise us.

But most of all and most importantly, we should try to keep in mind that what should make us shameful, certainly, is the halt to any sustainable progress in fashion that such thoughtless behavior is placing on the industry, and wear our same clothes twice and again with pride, with confidence and delight, if nothing else for that reason only.

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