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FASHION

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It. *Moda*; Fr. *Mode*; Germ. *Mode*; Span. *Moda*. While the English term derives from Old French “*façon*” (from Latin “*factio(n-)*”, in turn from “*facere*” = “to do, to make”), the corresponding terms belonging to other western modern languages derive from Latin “*modus*” (“mode, manner, shape”), first used in France before the 17th century as feminine noun to denote a current custom in clothing or behaving. It is noteworthy that its root is cognate with “modern” (“*modernus*”, from the adverb “*modo*” = “right now, recently”). Usually “fashion” means first of all the production and marketing of new styles of clothing, but it can concern also other spheres of objects (accessories, cosmetics, both luxury and mass consumer goods) or commodities of any kind (even ideas or moral values), that appear “trendy” (i.e.: new, able to orient others’ taste, hence desirable in a social group) in a certain historical context thanks to their way of appearing.

FASHION FROM AN AESTHETIC POINT OF VIEW: OPERATIVE APPROACHES

As one of the most relevant phenomena of the modern age, fashion is nowadays studied on a regular basis in various disciplines – sociology, semiotics, cultural studies, art theory and literature, psychology, anthropology, economics and management, design, etc. There is also no lack of purely philosophical analyses, which at least try to identify fashion as an object deserving conceptual investigation, so much so they sometimes consider it a complex phenomenon that is essential for understanding the current reality (see Svendsen 2004; Matteucci, Marino 2017).

Yet, the contribution that is still mostly missing seems to be the aesthetic one. The various studies of fashion by philosophers of the 19th and 20th centuries (from Spencer to Simmel, from Benjamin to Fink) focused on features not having directly to do with aesthetics (see Marino 2017, and – specifically for the German context – Lehmann 2000). In fact, most of them elaborated cultural and social arguments, while

only a few examined experiential and conceptual structures underlying the phenomena of fashion, almost carefully avoiding purely aesthetic arguments. Still today it is to say the least unusual to find actual scholars of aesthetics who address this issue in a not exclusively rhapsodic manner (among the rare exceptions: Moreno-Márquez 2010; Wolfendale, Kennett 2011; King 2017; Matteucci 2017). This probably reflects the fact that aesthetics was born as a philosophical discipline from a very radical gesture, i.e., the exclusion of the dimension of practicality from the determination of pleasure considered to be strictly aesthetic. And since interest is the foundation for the aesthetic pleasure generated by the experience of fashion, a philosophical approach faithful to the axiom of disinterested pleasure inevitably tends to ignore that experience from the scope that it considers its purview (see also Negrin 2012).

Not surprisingly, the first aesthetic reflections on fashion of some conceptual depth arose in the 19th century not so much in the field of philosophy but above all in literature. Balzac, Wilde, Baudelaire, d'Annunzio, Carlyle, Mallarmé: all of them show an interest in this phenomenon and often in its aesthetic implications not only in their literary works, but also in purely theoretical writings surely requiring speculative engagement. We can define that which is expressed in the writings concerning fashion by these extraordinary authors a kind of *operative* aesthetics. Basically, it constitutes the reflexive-pragmatic equivalent of the phantasmagoric reality that dominated the urban and metropolitan scenarios that the great 19th-century literature had persistently expressed, described and narrated in every national variation. It could therefore be said that the aesthetics of fashion was not absent for long but kept strictly outside the sphere of relevance attributed officially to philosophical aesthetics.

The only exception was the limited – but long-lasting (see Miller 2007) – debate on the legitimacy of including fashion in the fine arts system, taking as a starting point the same ideological framework underlying the origin of philosophical aesthetics, thereby instilling suspicions of fashion as an impure phenomenon from a theoretical point of view and therefore unworthy of speculative consideration per se. In these cases, the label “Aesthetics of Fashion” sounds like an attempt to programmatically determine a specific case study of a more general theoretical perspective. Therefore, it indicates a mere operative extension of the philosophy of fine arts.

FASHION FROM AN AESTHETIC POINT OF VIEW: TOWARDS A THEORETICAL APPROACH

We should wonder, however, whether we can consider a second manner of interpreting the label “Aesthetics of Fashion”. This could indicate that set of issues that fashion itself poses not only from an already established aesthetic viewpoint but most importantly in the perspective of a requalification of the aesthetic in general. In this genuinely theoretical sense, the first question to be raised is which consideration of the aesthetic is implied by fashion (not projected onto it), i.e., which type of reflective-conceptual understanding of the aesthetic it implicitly entails, or even more radically which aesthetic knowledge it demands. As multifaceted as it is, fashion certainly has to do with elements like style, shape, taste, beauty. But is it true that these elements, for how they act in this environment, are easily attributable to canonical categories that stand at the centre of the experience of the arts as traditionally understood and that are widely irreflexively used by common sense? If there are differences, is it

something that makes compatible or, to the contrary, incompatible the aesthetics implied by the first and the aesthetics implied by the second? In short, which is the aesthetics that does not simply “refer” to fashion, but that is *fashion’s own*? And finally, what relationship can there be between fashion’s aesthetics and the aesthetics dictated by other contemporary phenomena equally inextricably entangled with both extraordinary technological advances of the latest generations and the new social regime of the so-called “aesthetic”, “artistic” and/or “artist” capitalism in the age of globalization (see Böhme 2016; Lipovetsky, Serroy 2013)?

If fashion is the manner in which beauty generates the consumption of commodified goods thus requiring an always new production, if then it entails a notion of the aesthetic based on its use rather than its contemplation, it requires a conception of it founded on practices rather than on ideas or idealities. This remark would be sufficient to understand the difficulty of philosophy in general – and philosophical aesthetics specifically – to deal with it, although the history of 19th- and 20th-century philosophy shows that a heterogeneous group of thinkers expressed a genuine curiosity and interest on clothing and fashion, and although some authors have recently attempted at developing philosophical inquiries into fashion. While philosophy has usually privileged thematical and conceptual categories over practical structures of experience, only an aesthetics able to juggle notions that do not lose their operational and pragmatic component seems equipped to understand phenomena like fashion. Fashion can thus become a relevant transformation factor for aesthetics in general, thereby helping to bridge the persistent gap in the fashion/philosophy relationship due to the neglect of the dimension of the practices.

Following this theoretical approach, aesthetics meets, with fashion, a series of problems that are far-reaching. First of all, a question is to understand to what extent fashion can properly be considered an expressive “language”, as the semiotic research inaugurated by Barthes (1967) and developed by various theorists during the 1980s and 1990s seems to presume (see Edwards 2011: 20-32), which would imply the possibility of reducing the content of fashion to a propositionally determinable element. Opposed to this view is the insistence on uses. This is a privileged plan for social investigations and would bring the aesthetics of fashion closer to a sort of institutional theory, but with some amendments. In fact, this theory should be critically revisited on the basis of the consideration of the dynamic fluidity of behaviors and constraints that apply within the field of fashion, and above all of the interactional complexity that characterizes the definition of trend and taste today, emphasizing “when”, rather than “what” fashion is (see Loschek 2009).

Partially linked to this issue is a way of analyzing fashion on the basis of its anthropological function, starting from the role that fashion plays in sexual selection according to Darwin’s account (see Menninghaus 2003: 66-137). On the one hand, fashion is the aesthetic tool for creating a common ground for imitation-distinction processes through which *Homo Sapiens* interacts in a group (following the line of research inaugurated by Simmel 1911 and updated by Bourdieu 1979). On the other hand, fashion aesthetic taste can establish significance outside of cognitive schemes, and so can orient *Homo Sapiens* in his/her primary transactions with natural and cultural environments (Wilson 2003: 1-15) accomplished within the sphere of human appearance (Naukarinen 1999).

FASHION AS AN AESTHETIC ISSUE

This can be proved by considering the following problem. It is precisely in an aesthetic manner that fashion solves the important question of extracting sense also in the absence of contents that can be defined cognitively. It does so by insisting on "tacit", "embodied", "non-representational" elements that are significant from the perceptual, expressive and emotional point of view (see Eckersley 2008). In this way it compensates with the obsolescence cycle for the lack of definite and stable structures. In the spiral of fashion, consumption takes place thanks to the compulsion to repeat the experience of consumption itself for it is emotional and socially aggregating, hence according to intrinsically aesthetic coordinates. Its aim, although still linked to practical concerns, is not the satisfaction of a specifically determinable need the purchased good would be merely instrumental for. For this reason, the experience of fashion, in its characterization which radically differs from the canonical view of aesthetics as a philosophy of art, paradoxically becomes paradigmatic of the current forms of art experience. And, in fact, today artworks are purchased – just like fashion items – as the pledge of a direct and emotional encounter with those who have produced them rather than on the basis of a formal or content-oriented appreciation, and hence "not for conformist or speculative reasons, but for emotional, relational ones" (Lipovetsky 2006: 87). As Lipovetsky illustrates: "In such cases the purchase expresses a personal link, a choice, an emotional way of positioning oneself in a milieu. It reflects an expressive, user-friendly individualism" (*ibidem*).

Secondly, it is on the aesthetic level that fashion seems to act today as an agency for the construction of individual and social identities, giving emphasis to the dominant processes of aestheticization. In this sense it can be reasonably defined as the matrix to that spread of the aesthetic in the everyday that characterizes our era (see Iannilli 2017). This aspect is usually dealt with by shedding negative light on it as a mere commodifying alienation. And yet, precisely in the consumption of the aesthetic, fashion seems to offer a different possibility.

By conferring symbolic value to a consumer good, fashion makes the commodity exceed the simple domain of exchange value. Fashion goods momentarily assume (also) the value of non-fungibility. The experience fashion generates is therefore not aimed at something external; as consumption of its own manifestation, i.e., as hyper-consumption, it takes the form of an immersive experience whose aspects then become an integral part of a life environment encompassing the organism involved in it. Therefore, it outlines a project of individual and social identity to which the consumer feels he/she belongs by virtue of his/her aesthetic skills, of his/her taste. It is in the (often tacit) exercise of this mediation that the apparent immediacy of fashion is aesthetically constituted and capable of configuring identity. So, it's true that we are oriented towards aesthetic value more than ever before. The point is that such aesthetic value can be regressive or emancipatory. It is regressive if it ignores its underlying dynamics, but also if it represses the logic that it follows. It is emancipatory when it nourishes the reflectivity which is immanent in *aisthesis*, to the extent that it fosters the perceiver's competence concerning the aesthetic condition of his/her own everyday life – exactly as it seems to happen in the case of fashion (see also Zangwill 2011).

Fashion certainly has to do with the processes of commodification and is therefore an economic phenomenon; it certainly has to do with public prestige and is therefore a social phenomenon (see Carnevali 2012); it certainly has to do with the display of personal identity and is therefore a psychological phenomenon; it certainly has to do with systems of communication and cultural expression and is therefore a phenomenon that is semiotic, anthropological, etc. But all these functions are made effective in and by a gratifying experience that tends to be distinguished by categories like beauty, style, glamour and the like, namely by the enhancement of positive aesthetic pleasure based on the potential – one might say: required – shared appreciation that marks the sphere of taste.

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