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A Crisis of Power in Fashion: Is There Agency for Change?

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Abstract

A growing consensus is emerging that the modus operandi of the fashion system is in need of change. Yet for change it requires not only incentives but the agency and power to transform. Designers must ask what kind of power is needed to change, and how such power can be mobilized, cultivated and leveraged.

KEYWORDS: power, sustainability, agency, user-engagement, repair

There seems to be little argument that big changes have occurred across the field of fashion over the last decade, from accelerated collections, abundance of low-price on-trend garments, ubiquitous fashion weeks, teen influencers and one-click shopping. And all this is occurring at once, to the degree that the magazine *Business of Fashion* has asked if fashion trends even exist anymore (Annett 2015).

Unfortunately, none of the “democratic” indicators above points towards a more sustainable use-life with garments, or a sudden egalitarian surge in the decisions concerning the future of fashion. That is, the changes (or “disruptions” as innovators like to call it) seem to alter some dynamics between brands, supply-chains and consumption behaviors, but not really in ways that challenge the accumulation of power and money to brand conglomerates. There seems to be little disruption when it comes to plastic pollution, or brand innovations in enhanced lifetime usage of everyday garments.

If change is a measure of systemic flexibility there may be some comfort in the words of trend forecaster Li Edelkoort, who assured us that “Fashion is obsolete” in her *Anti-Fashion Manifesto* of 2015 (Edelkoort 2015). Yet it seems Edelkoort is primarily suggesting the old *system of fashion* is in crisis, rather than fashion as an industry. Or rather, it seems to be the idea that editors, designers and trend oracles can dictate, control, or forecast what people should wear that is outworn. It is important to notice that this shift is happening not because power has been dispersed through equal rights and agency amongst users, nor through a free fashion press examining the corruption and hypocrisy of brands, nor because power-holders are being held responsible for their actions. The fashion system is not obsolete because “democratic fashion” has suddenly become a threat to power.

Yet this notion that fashion is in some way obsolete carries implications on how change in the fashion system can occur, especially towards more sustainable practices. There is a crisis of power in fashion, affecting how sustainable practices can be implemented across industry and users. If change is to occur, there needs to be some form of agency or power to push for this change to happen. And if there is a reordering of power-relations in fashion, designers need to better work out where and how they can push to have impact.

As political philosophers have argued over the centuries, there are many ways to understand the question of power in institutions or overall society, how power is manifested and what it is. For example, power can be captured from the simplest question of “who rules?” to more complex relations, such as “who does what to whom and in whose interest?” (Geuss 2008) In the following argument, I will make three simple distinctions, examining power *over* another, power *to* affect circumstances, and finally power *with* an alliance of actors. These three categories are painted with a broad brush, and may also overlap slightly, but they suffice to point out some of the shifting and conflicting dynamics across the fashion

industry, while also highlighting some of the challenges facing the introduction of more sustainable fashion practices.

Power over (control)

The first power, *power over*, signifies the possibility to govern and control the behavior of others. Popular narratives are full of this model, where designers, editors and advertisers execute orders or brainwash consumers to follow their latest decrees. The popular movie *The Devil Wears Prada* builds on this narrative, telling the story of a dictatorial power within a strictly hierarchical fashion magazine. Following this narrative, it becomes natural to think it is the fashion industry and its media channels that have the real power to create change.

But tellingly, *The Devil Wears Prada* is about a print magazine. In today's media landscape, the Silicon Valley dream of ubiquitous computing has merged with social media to become *ubiquitous fashion*. This is a model of fashion consumption where users engage with fashion far beyond the printed page or in the stores, but instead consume fashion at every moment, guided by attention algorithms. Through social media feeds, the looks of others are not only continuously queued up to be watched, but also dispersed, graded and quantified with various forms of "likes," making sure every consumer knows what is highly regarded by the right people. Peer-surveillance, or "co-veillance," (Palmås 2015) makes competition and quantification an inherent part of the very act of communication.

With ubiquitous fashion spread over digital media platforms, there is a diminishing power of the classic alliance between brand, advertisers and editors to affect consumer behavior. The power of this previous axis of influence has been shifted towards digital algorithms, guiding the attention and affecting the behaviors of users. What Shoshana Zuboff (2019) calls "surveillance capitalism" concentrates the power of user behavior change to the platforms that control their attention, values and behaviors, on-line as much as off-line. At the same time, within the industry, supply chain algorithms squeeze designers and managers into limited spaces for action that control the possibility of changing systemic issues. The hope that "transparency" can help change behaviors seems problematic as all information at all times is edited and filtered, if not matched by simply "fake" narratives. Transparency is only valuable as long as truth is, and it may have questionable impact on an industry based on the production of illusion.

The power brands have over consumer behavior is thus sandwiched between a top layer of digital platforms, selling behavior change and attention through media content modulation, yet living off a need for more and more content to show (that is, more consumption). These powerful platforms, with their dependency on visual consumer behavior, have an agenda of their own, only partially overlapping with the fashion industry (so far, selling more stuff means more new looks). From below,

there is a bottom layer of feral consumer competition for new outfits and looks, furthermore fuelled by a plethora of miniscule influencers, each with their own subcultural following that needs to be entertained and visually stimulated.

Overall, this is a landscape of consumption matched by a paradigm of neuromarketing and behavioral economics (such as “nudging,”) that is in turn part of a more general shift in guided consumer freedom, sometimes tied to a form of governmentality called *neoliberalism* (Isin 2004; Whitehead *et al* 2018). This data-driven paradigm shift highlights how it is no longer the decisions of brands, advertisers and editors that rule the world of fashion, but more complex relations between social media platforms and consumer behaviors. Thus even if brands and designers would truly advocate sustainable fashion practices, their commands would stand unanswered. In this crisis of power, having lost *power over* fashion, brands face a challenge to find enough agency to get out of the unsustainable problems they were part of creating.

Power to (agency)

The crisis of power to address change from within the hierarchy coincides with a hope for a second type of power to step in, the more horizontal *power to*, or the individualized agency to affect (often local) circumstances. Under the current imperative, or even obligation, for subjects to “self-design” (Groys 2008), consumers should not merely choose between options, but be entrepreneurial auteurs of their own authentic self. Here, brands can sell customers their desired individual style authorship, not least through customization, exclusive drops and limited edition experiences. But a similar user-driven perspective is also popular within educational settings, especially in design schools and in research. The push for individual or community agency resonates well with small-scale initiatives with limited impact (manageable in scale and appears real enough to become case studies). And not least does it help with boosting self-esteem, at least *doing something*, and often under the slogan “be the change!”

I have been there myself along my research journey (von Busch 2008), and I find myself scrutinizing its possible impact. This user-agency-focused perspective has been suggested in approaches that put emphasis on emotional durability, mobilizing affects to increase the lifespan of garments, or utilizing personal stories, documenting and emphasizing memories as important sources to enhance the relationship between user and garment. This is also done by emphasizing repair skills, patching up and “hacking” used garments, or in broad cultivation of user agency when it comes to identity and dress. Most of these are methods that aim to challenge the inter-passivity promoted through everyday consumerism, to instead mobilize capabilities towards sustainable and socially desirable relationships between people and clothes.

But this focus on individual agency, the agency *to* affect one’s identity by engaging with and upcycling used goods in various ways, still

faces a lot of questions. One of them is what room such methods offer for social mobility and novelty or newness. What kind of consumers engage in these kind of practices? And what needs to change if they should be more generally applied? It gets even more problematic when the emphasis is primarily on recycling and upcycling, which often promotes austerity under a virtuous celebration of emotionality that can be unhelpful in many ways. It may be nice to inherit some garments from grandparents, but much of the journey of fashion is to *escape* the past, family decrees and tradition. Just like with music, there is a sense of freedom that comes with *not* inheriting the tastes of one's parents.

But there is also a normative challenge in the focus on reuse and memory. Whose past is worth preserving, what prestige comes through it, and what privilege does this preserve? Or to put it differently: who gains agency in such system, versus *who needs it the most*? Most of us want to inherit the prestige that comes with an old Chanel bag, while not all want to inherit the patina of poverty that comes with the tattered copy of the same bag. Inheritance is for the privileged few, and not everyone carries pleasant memories they want their garments to remind them of.

There is a similar challenge when it comes to fashion capabilities, or what I have called "fashion-ability." (von Busch 2008) Such focus on capabilities may create worthy skills and user agency beyond the narrow means of consumption. But hacking an operating system, even a cultural, social or economic operating system, always risks preserving the norm for what is a worthy ability within the current value system or environment. Too often, designers model the agency people "should" have (or want to have) from their own experiences, without asking people what they actually prefer, or setting such agency in a socio-economic or cultural context. What could be an educational opportunity can easily turn into paternalism.

Another risk is that even under the umbrella of user-agency, projects can come to support elitist norms within the culture of fashion that keeps reproducing exclusive and possibly violent values and behaviors, even if more people are able to participate. Bringing more people into the race does not necessarily mean there can be more winners. The more sustainable fashion practice is framed in frugal terms of upcycling, preservation, and memory, the more it echoes of the privileged few preaching austerity to the poor. To get out of this crisis, focus must turn to how users' *power to be sustain-able* can allow for social mobility and newness, while also being within reach for the people who need the newness of fashion to present the potential of their best selves.

Power with (alliance)

The third type of power is the power *with others*, built through alliances and collaborations. Especially the idea of collaboration and co-design has been very strong over the last decades, not least within the industry where every brand seems to do new limited drops of goods together with other designers, artists and idols. But the issue for collaboration is

that not all pooling of resources is good, fair or generative. Geuss' fundamental question of power still stands: "who does what to whom and in whose interest?" (Geuss 2008)

As with every collaboration, there is the constant risk of collaborationism, of surrendering and running the errands of the more powerful party, and often at the price of one's values. Few collaborations are symmetrical. It is always good to ask, "who does not win, or is even pushed out, in your win-win scenario?"

Yet even with these risks, a search for the *power with* helps open some fresh perspectives on fashion as a form of connection, interaction and bond between people. It helps bridge the perspectives of large systems and isolated individuals. The idea of alliances can help put focus on concerted action beyond top-down dictates and designations, and escape the isolation and atomization of agency in bottom-up individual action. But what kind of connections and interactions does fashion facilitate, and how can such connections help envision more sustainable fashion practices?

The current focus on units - of design, production, distribution and sale of units of clothing - limits our perspective on what fashion practice can be. So one way to get out of this could be to think of *fashion as a shared sensibility*, rather than an industry, system or product. Not only can sensibilities be trained and cultivated, but they are also amplified when shared with others. Could such a perspective help give birth to new approaches to fashion, perhaps based on attentiveness and care? Such perspective could help foster more pleasant (and even sustainable?) ways to be with clothes and others. If fashion is seen as a form of flirting, an energy and viral vitality (von Busch 2018), what other fashion practices would come to our attention? Or if fashion is more of a game we play together with others, a form of social risk-and-reward gamble (von Busch & Hwang 2018), how could we play differently, and play with less negative impact?

As we face the crisis of power in fashion, it may also be a favorable time to challenge many aspects of what we habitually think is fashion. And as we search for the power to change the fashion system, should we not also take the opportunity to search for the power to change ourselves?

Disclosure Statement

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