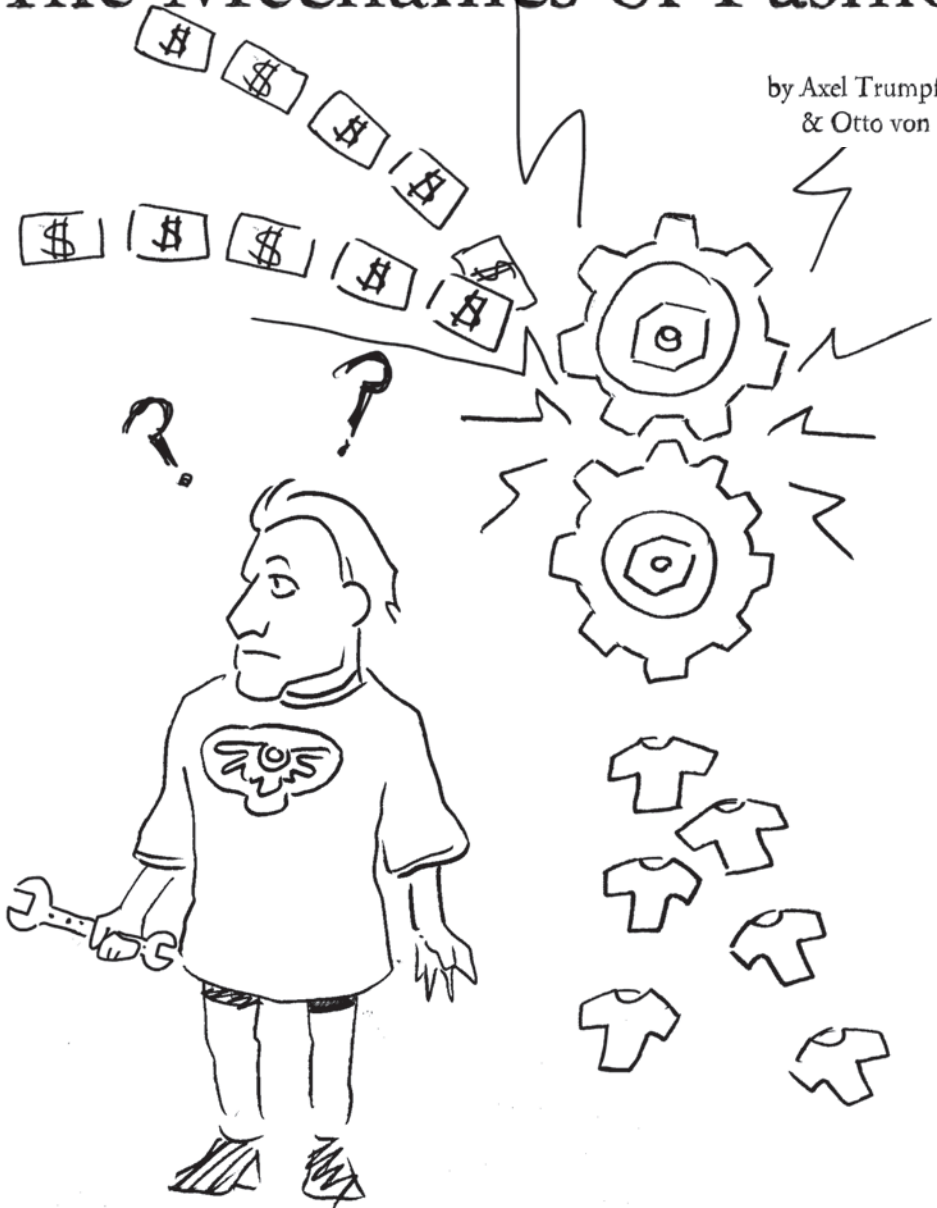


The Mechanics of Fashion

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Some say our wardrobe reflects who we are.
Yet clothes can be used in many different ways.



Some clothes are like camouflage;
We want to blend in.



So we look like our peers.



Some times we want to be different.
We try everything odd at once and go wild.





However, a lot of people want to be different and have the same ideas of what "different" is.



It is as if fashion is a language of sorts.
It can silently articulate something about us,
so we don't need to say it all the time.



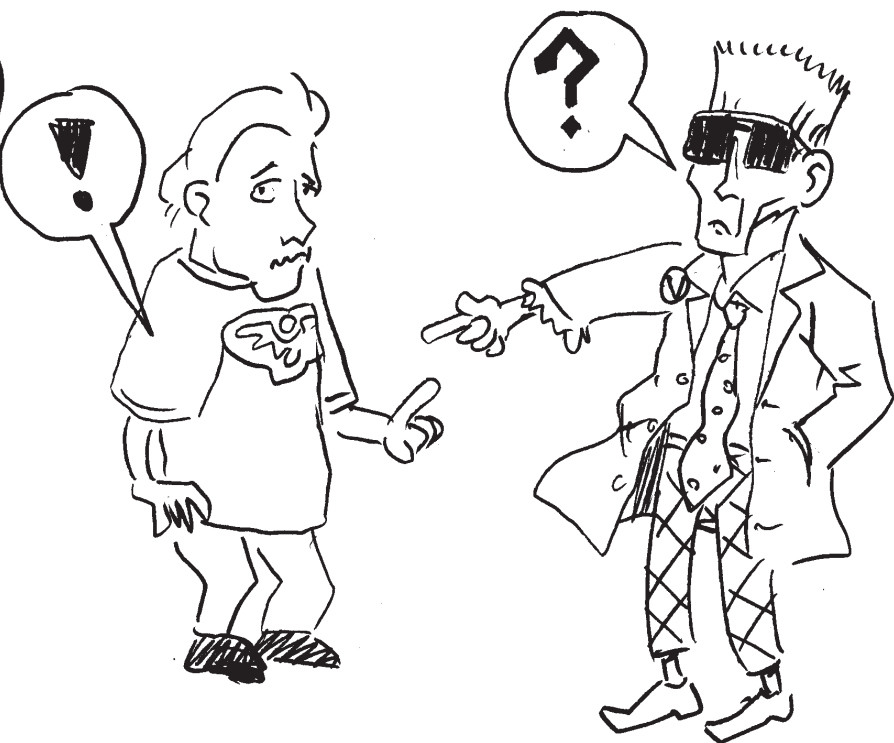
So we have an idea of who we are. We try express that with the clothes we choose.



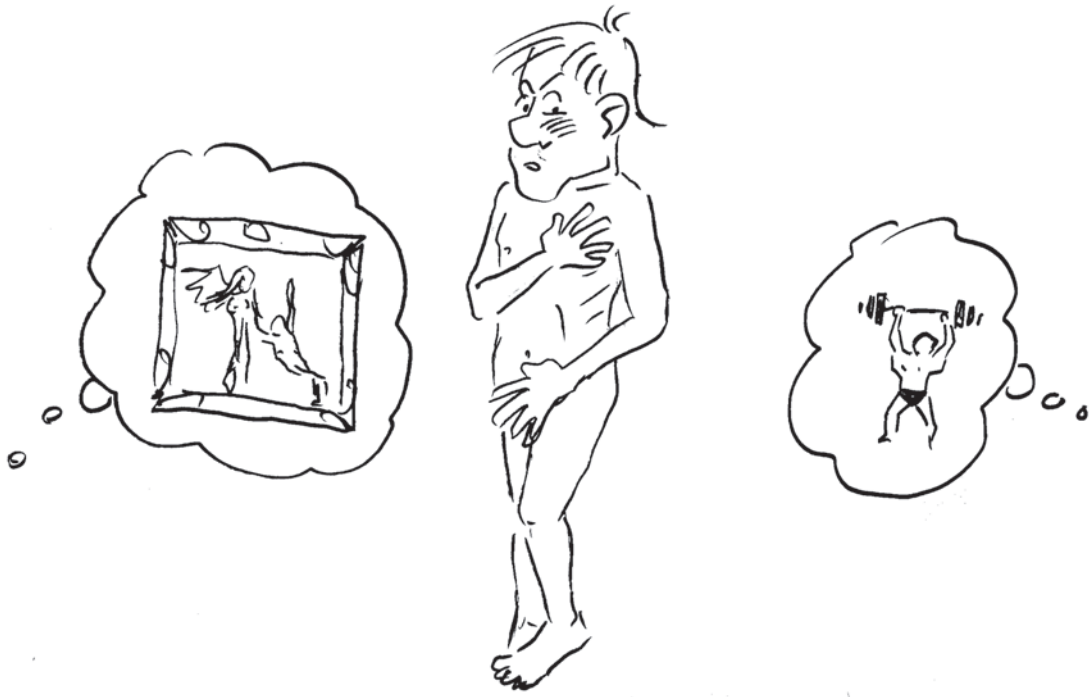


But people interpret clothes differently, and it can be hard to get through what we really intend.





Likewise, the codes are changing. A garment that meant something special to some, means something else to others.

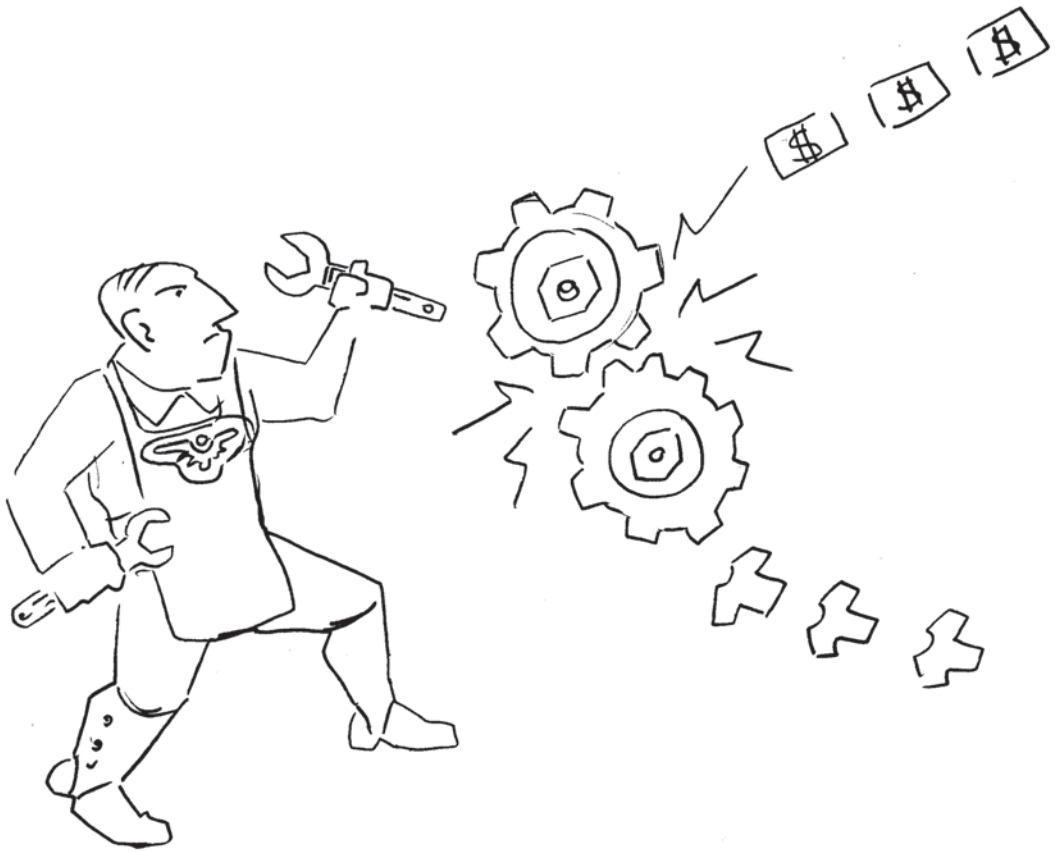


Even if we are naked we cannot escape the judgement of others and their references of beauty or ugliness, what is “cool” or not.





We can't even escape choice. Even if we would choose clothes blindfolded, someone else has already chosen for us what is accessible.



True fashion victims are those who do not understand the mechanics of fashion. To have choice in fashion means to be engaged and study how it works, to start tinkering with it, and make it one's own.

In the opening scene of Wim Wenders' movie about fashion designer Yohji Yamamoto he starts by trying to understand what identity is, and Wenders states;

We are creating an image of ourselves. We are attempting to resemble this image. Is that what we call identity? The accord between the image we have created of ourselves, and ... ourselves? Just who is that; 'ourselves'?
(Wenders 1989)

To sociologist Georg Simmel fashion is a force in society based on the conflict between "adaptation to society and individual departure from its demands" (Simmel 1971: 295). Fashion is a mode of blending into a social group, or to belong to a temporary community or culture, but it is also the token for a wish to carve out a personal expression. As noted by fashion theorist Anne Hollander there is a wide spectrum of what fashion is:

There are different ways of defining fashion, but what is meant here is the whole spectrum of desirable ways of looking at any given time. The scope of what everyone wants to be seen wearing in a given society is what is in fashion; and this includes the haute couture, all forms of anti-fashion and nonfashion, and the garments and accessories of people who claim no interest in fashion - a periodically fashionable attitude in the history of dress.
(Hollander, 350)

In historical societies clothing did not change often. Dress looked the same more or less

through the ages of imperial China, the Ottoman empire, or through the Middle Ages in Europe. The cut of the clothes were more or less the same. The materials differed so the richer had more exclusive embroidery and colours. As noted by economic historian Fernand Braudel, in societies which "remained more or less stable, fashion was less likely to change" (Braudel 1981: 312). The evolution of dress was slow, and often hindered by public decrees, to avoid mixing of communities, castes or social classes. Such as the ban to wear yellow in Imperial China, except for the emperor, or even from which fibres each social class could make their sandals, as in Japan during the Tokugawa period (1600-1867). In medieval Europe there was established at several times sumptuary laws to regulate luxury, reserving certain articles and fabrics, or even haircuts, for special social classes (Roach & Eicher 1979: 13). All through history, people have been vain and preoccupied with their appearance, but only lately with something organized we could call fashion.

Though, change of style has always happened. After Alexander the Great it was popular for Greek men to shave off their beard. During the reign of Roman emperor Hadrian, beard was once again popular. Though, most fashion theorists agree that something happens during late medieval times, with the Renaissance and the emergence of mercantile capitalism. There was room and funds for social change outside of the inherited aristocracy. A social game appeared where change appeared and was cultivated for its own sake and adapted for the individual person (Svendsen 2006: 23)

Fashion is a revolt against the oppression of the old, as told by philosopher Roland Barthes: "Every new fashion is a refusal to inherit, a subversion against the oppression of the preceding Fashion." (Barthes 1983: 273) This love for the new is a major part of the modern project. But there is also another prerequisite for fashion to evolve, as Barthes notes; "if a person buys more than he wears, there is Fashion." (Barthes 1983: 298) With surplus we can easier make distinctions and we come to choose one thing before the other, not from need, but from desire. This is something also sociologist Pierre Bourdieu agrees with, as he means that fashion is simply the latest variation of a previous variation: "Fashion is the latest fashion, the latest difference." (Bourdieu, 1993:135) It is this forward motion, in amplified by the industry, that makes fashion a "perpetuum mobile"; a machine in perpetual motion propelled by a "self-feeding, self-sustaining, self-propelling and self-invigorating process" (Bauman 2010: 55)

To social philosopher Gilles Lipovetsky fashion is a specific Western phenomenon, as it requires the possibility of social mobility, and is intimately connected to a democratic society. Lipovetsky further means fashion requires a democratic society to work, and it even promotes democratic values to the extent that the more fashion interested society becomes, promoting more individualistic and even egoist projects, the more democratic our societies will become. Indeed, to Lipovetsky, fashion is "the ultimate phase of democracy" (Lipovetsky 1994: 10) Lipovetsky makes his point that many

totalitarian societies has tried to promote uniforms for their citizens to reduce social friction, however, according to Lipovetsky, it is actually fashion and popular mass culture that reduces social friction, by being just shallow. This seems idealistic as fashion still flourishes in many dictatorships.

Somehow fashion's main purpose is to communicate. In general, clothes speak instead of us. We delegate agency to objects and they act on behalf of us. Like in the ceremonies of "interpassivity", explored by theorists like Slavoy Zizek (1998) and Robert Pfaller (2003), we surround ourselves with rituals of substitution; the canned laughter on the television laughs instead of us, or the Tibetan prayer wheels which prays for us as we put them in motion. Similarly, clothes speak instead of us having to express it otherwise. A sports jacket can make me look as if I am an athlete. A diving watch makes people think I am a diver, and I might even feel like a diver as I set different functions to beep.

Just like a t-shirt can spell some message out loud, so does other clothes. Some uniforms are specifically made to express specific meaning in specific contexts and a certain role of the wearer. At a hospital it is good to know who is a doctor and who is a patient and not having to ask everyone.

In a similar vein, we delegate parts of our identity creation to fashion designers and their brands. We buy expensive clothes partly because they appear in social contexts with which we relate to. An exclusive jacket worn by

exclusive people makes me too feel exclusive as I have it on, like I am part of a special group. Similarly, subcultures are also based on looking "different", usually opposed to what is considered "normal". If normal clothes are considered boring or polite, some subcultures try to take on a subversive stance by being offensively rude. As social theorist Dick Hebdige puts it, punk clothes are "the sartorial equivalent of swear words." (Hebdige 1979: 114)

Some theorists take the communication of clothes by the word, and mean it is actually a language in itself. Novelist and academic Alison Lurie even proposes a that clothes has a specific language, with an own vocabulary and grammar (Lurie 1992: 4). Likewise, having a full wardrobe makes one able to "express a wide range of meanings" (5) while leaving the one with fewer almost mute. But as pointed out by cultural theorist Malcolm Barnard the communication of fashion is more diverse, and communication is more than transmitting messages, it is also a social interaction and a collaborative production of meaning, and its constant essence is that it continually reconstitutes itself (Barnard 1996).

This paradox between meaning and non-meaning, ephemerality and endurance, is something Wim Wenders returns to in his movie about Yohji Yamamoto. When Yamamoto works closely with an image of Sartre and gets excited about the form of the collar in this specific photo, Wenders comments,

Yohji seemed to me to express himself simultaneously in two languages, to play two

different instruments at the same time: one ephemeral, the other permanent, one fleeting, the other enduring, one mutable, the other immutable. (Wenders 1989)

It is with this double action we play the social game of fashion. As philosopher Jean Baudrillard states, fashion is like a social theatre in which the commodities, as well as we, are the props. But whereas language "aims at communication, fashion plays at it" (Baudrillard 1993: 94). We can use fashion to communicate, and we can play with its meanings, even if we have little chance to change the meanings or the powers that make out the industry. Yet this does not leave us helpless. If we know the workings of the system we can become more conscious on what forces that constitute the shaping our visual selves and what makes up the machinery of fashion's "perpetuum mobile".

The logic of fashion might offer possibilities and a room for the individual to grow, but it does not promote an autonomous shaping of that same individual. That has to be left to other practices, since, to use the words of sociologist Rosalind Coward; "One thing fashion is quite categorically not is an expression of individuality." (Coward 1984: 30)

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Fashion is today like a self-propelling machine, and most of us are trapped inside it. This work exposes some of its forces and inner workings.



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