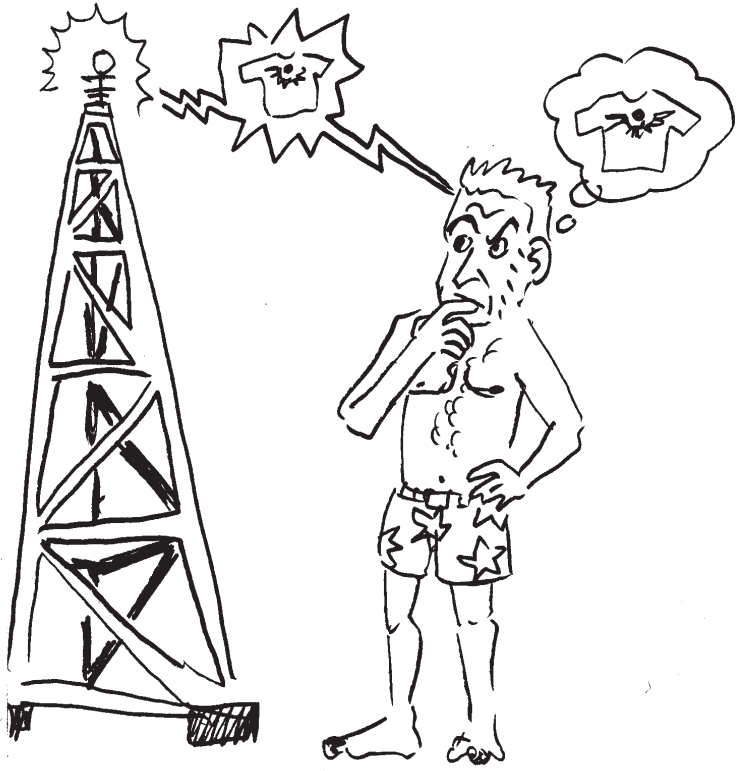


# The Virus of Fashion

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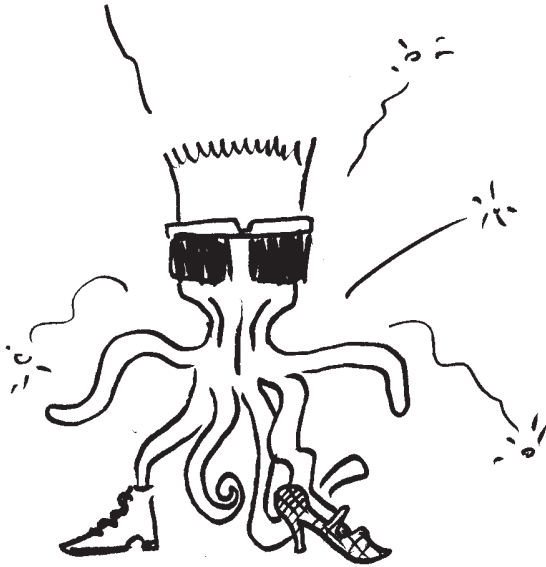
It is common to think fashion is dictated by the “fashion system”, almost like a radio broadcast.





And consumers are controlled by media,  
programmed and commanded almost like robots.

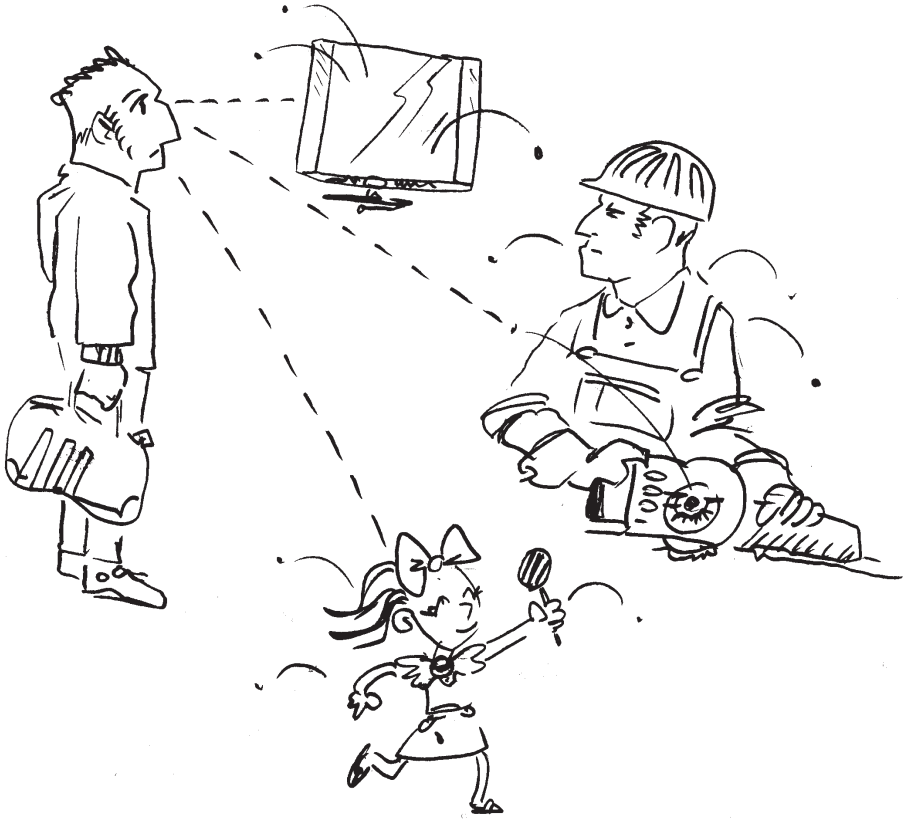




But perhaps fashion is more like a virus, spreading like a pandemic among people through networks of friends and acquaintances.







We get influences from everywhere, also media, but it is our personal relationships that affect us.





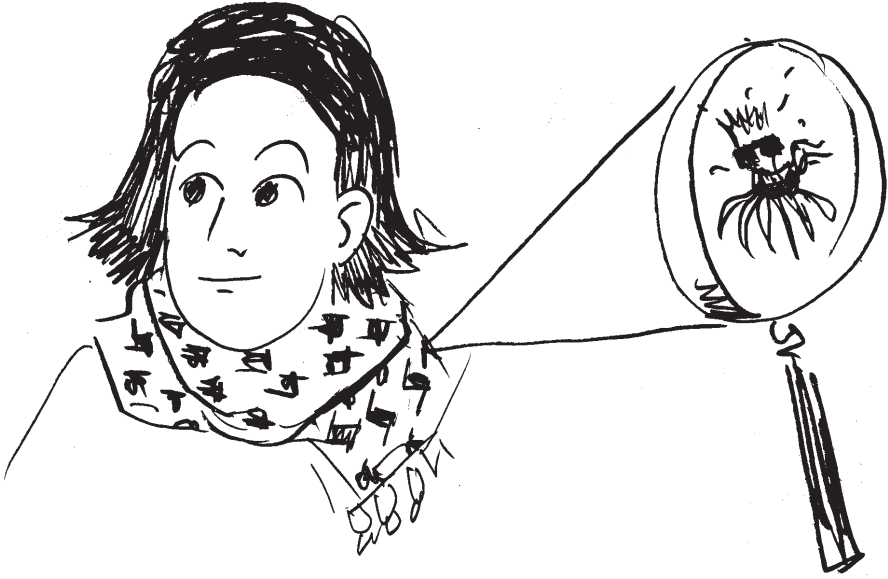
When we socialize we transmit values and intensify belief, like the contagion of a disease.





I have a friend who was very reactionary and I thought she was very independent and unique.





But one day she got the popular scarf virus.







I got worried and started to investigate the traces of where the fashion virus could have come from.





It seemed she got the virus from her admired sister who is very chic.





She in turn had got it from a cool guy she was hanging out with, who had got it from someone else.





But soon enough other people started wearing that kind of scarf too, and it didn't seem very reactionary or independent anymore.







My friend got cured very quickly and now she seems immune to that scarf virus, at least for some time ahead.



Fashion is the celebration of the immediate future. By being constantly new, fashion indicates that the future can be something else, and it pulls us there, by force almost, promising the endless possibilities of the new, the unwritten, our possible better self. The inspiration for our new better self we always get from others and it is them we relate to.

Fashion is a phenomenon of imitation, or mimetics. But this is nothing unique to fashion per se, but a behaviour deeply rooted in all human doings. Humans have a homophily; we like being alike, and "when people are free to do as the please, they usually imitate each other." (Christakis & Fowler 2009: 112)

Most often fashion has been seen as an imitation which "trickles down" from the exclusive elite to the masses. Perhaps most famously, French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu meant that imitation is the prime logic behind the creation of social "distinction" and taste, and to Bourdieu taste is in no way autonomous or personal (Bourdieu 1984). Taste originates as part of a social status game, for individuals or groups to reach a higher status in the eyes of others.

On the other hand, sociologist Gabriel Tarde meant that laws of imitation form all

social bonds and pass through every part of society, like echoes or "rays" through the diverse and overlapping social networks. To Tarde, the laws of imitation work in all directions, especially horizontally, instead of trickling down from the top. All human behaviours are based on imitation and it is through such repetitions that societies are formed.

Without fashion and custom, social quantities would not exist, there would be no values, no money, and, consequently, no science of wealth or finance. (Tarde 1903: 16)

This type of imitation can be seen in all fashion, perhaps most famously in the creation of the classic men's suit after the French revolution, or in the jeans in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Social philosopher Gilles Lipovetsky analyses Tarde, and also sees fashion appear as a break between two ages, as a force driving freedom, social mobility and the modern era.

Fashion and custom are the two great forms of imitation; they allow the assimilation of individuals to society. When the influence of one's forebears yields to the suggestion of innovators, ages of custom give way to ages of fashion. Whereas in ages of custom one obeys rules handed down from generation to generation, in ages of fashion one imitates novelties from else-

where, as well as people from one's immediate surroundings. (Lipovetsky 1994: 227)

Ages of customs are the traditions, the laws of successive repetition, of inheriting the past and the institutions preserving it intact. The ages of fashion are something else;

In eras when fashion dominates, the traditional past is no longer the object of devotion. The current moment galvanizes people's awareness. Novelties have prestige: change and the present are venerated. (...) Fashion entails a specific temporality and a specific sociality. (Lipovetsky 1994: 227)

What fashion does according to Lipovetsky is releasing the full power of social imitation, encouraging mobility, style competition and breaking the petrifying forces of history and heritage.

Nevertheless, we don't imitate anything. We imitate behaviour we like or find attractive and very rarely things we dislike. A already Rousseau noted, we are always engaged in a game of inequality and status,

He who sings or dances the best, he who is the most handsome, the strongest, and most adroit or the most elegant becomes the most highly regarded; and this is the

first step towards inequality, and at the same time towards vice. (Rousseau in Cranston 1991: 304)

We use our idols as inspiration. They become archetypes for us and we remix as we create our own self-image. This process is widely discussed in the books of novelist Orhan Pamuk: we become ourselves by being someone else. However, this process is a walk on a tightrope. If we are not careful we might at the same time give away our self-respect and participate in our own underdevelopment and inferiority (Sennett 2003).

Our urge to imitate is closely connected the affects of desire, something philosopher Rene Girard has called "mimetic desire" (Girard 2005). Mimetic desire is not radiating from an object. Instead, desire is always the imitation of someone else's desire. Desire is constituted as a "desire along Others". It is in the convergence of cravings that creates the shimmer around the object of desire, but not for the object in itself;

Rivalry does not arise because of the fortuitous convergence of two desires on a single object; rather, the subject desires the object because the rival desires it. In desiring an object the rival alerts the subject to the desirability of the object. The rival, then, serves as a model for the subject, not only in regard

to such secondary matters as style or opinions but also, and more essentially, in regard to desires. (Girard 2005: 154f)

We desire what others desire because we imitate their desires. It is an appetite born from the social nature of humans. A trivial example used by Girard is how her husband once again desires a neglected wife as soon as another man courts her. Desire is intensified by the will to do better than the rival and we compete not over the objects of desire, but the goals of desire.

In the recent decades the social terrain has been levelling out, at least on a symbolic level, as many traditional class indicators have become more accessible; travel, holidays, and not the least luxury and fashion (Thomas 2007). We look at our equals for imitative rivalry, and the symbolic tools at hand are today more accessible than before. As it is easily accessible to so many, we do not just replicate the media icons, but fashion becomes a tool for building identity. In the words of fashion theorist Elizabeth Wilson: "What we engage in is no longer only the relatively simple process of direct imitation, but the less conscious one of identification." (Wilson 1985: 157)

In this horizontal perspective of the social, fashion imitation is not a mechanic repetition of what the "fashion system"

says. Rather, fashion takes on more virus-like properties: it spreads from person to person, through the social networks, rather than the media networks.

Using the viral metaphor we could say that fashion is a sort of "meme", a unit of imitation, like a tune, idea, catch-phrase, and exists as a living structure, just like a gene (Dawkins 1976). A meme is a "virus of the mind",

a woman might have in mind a meme like It's good to be aware of the current fashion; another meme, Women who dress fashionably get ahead; and a third meme, I want to get ahead. (Brodie 1996: 7)

The meme or virus metaphor is very illustrative, and one should not make the mistake to think that the host is passive, but quite the opposite; viral infections require an active host. The cell that hosts the virus is not a passive victim of aggression, but instead actively absorbs the virus through a series of complex dynamic interactions (cf Domingo et al 2008; Cann 2005). Viruses exhibit several salient behaviours and activities, like infectiousness, immunity, replication, incubation, mutation and dormancy, and we could apply all of them to the functions of fashion.

As with viruses, the contagion or imitation of fashion is not a clear distinction



between active fashion setters and passive followers, but an assemblage of several active components - discussing, inspiring, seeking, prioritizing, buying, showing, etc. Instead, what is pacifying is the system of consumption, with its dominant ready-to-wear regime, that encourages a surrogate or receiving attitude for the host or consumer. The industry materializes fashion into products which we buy, and we use them in our social rivalry, rather than look at the source of our desire. The industry delegates the fashionable qualities to these products and as they are now cheaper and more accessible than ever, the social rivalry is more intense, we waste more clothes and have become dependent on these new social skins for our social games.

If we want alternatives, we could encourage consumers to experiment with new ways to actively engage with the creation of fashion memes. We could become active on micro level, cultivate skills, create scenes and cultures, and experiment with setting off new micro-imitations. That is what we could call ways to be fashion-able.

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How come fashion has such influence on us?  
In this short story we will follow the virus of  
fashion and see how it infects us with desire.



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