Ruhan Liao

Sichuan Fine Arts Institute, Chongqing, China

How to Produce Novelty? Creating, Borrowing, Modifying, Repeating And Forgetting: The Process of Contemporary Fashion Aesthetics

Abstract: The aesthetics of fashion can be regarded as the aesthetics of novelty since constant changes make novelty the core of fashion. Based on Colin Campbell's theory, novelty is a judgment about our subjective experiences, indicating something we never experienced before. In the early stage of the fashion system, designers led fashion trends by creating brand-new items or borrowing foreign elements. Then, as the pace of fashion circulation increased, designers started to produce novelty by modifying details, or by repeating what was in fashion long before. Hence, fashion became cyclical. And the cycle duration would become shorter and shorter as the repetition sped up. At this stage, novelty is not based on whether the item is brand-new, but whether we still remember it. In the future, maybe the repeating of the old cannot maintain the feeling of novelty any more since the pace of fashion change is too quick to give enough time for the new to become old and forgotten. At that time, the novelty will not be based on whether we still remember it, but whether we want to forget it. Therefore, with the acceleration of fashion change, the method of how fashion produces novelty has gone through a logical sequence as follows: creating something brand-new, borrowing foreign elements, modifying details, repeating the forgotten old, and forgetting what is still new. Novelty has gone through a process from 'externally determined' to 'internally determined', moving to the direction of 'self-deception determined'.

Keywords: aesthetics; change; fashion; novelty; subjective experience.

Fashion and novelty

Fashion is an important modern cultural system. Without being limited to the Western world, fashion exists almost everywhere. Without being limited to the field of clothes and accessories, fashion dominates different areas from personalized art creation to serious scientific studies.[1] It is well accepted that fashion is a system of constant change. What is in fashion today might be out of fashion tomorrow. In other words, fashion is always 'becoming'. It changes because of its need for change. Due to its transience, instability, levity, and superficiality, some scholars describe fashion as

---

[1] Cf. Diana Crane, "Fashion in Science: Does it Exist?" *Social Problems* 16, 4 (1969): 433–41.

*Author contact information: lrh0603@126.com

an insignificant research topic, especially in philosophy which has for centuries aimed to find the absolute, the essence of our world.[2] However, there are indeed some eloquent discussions about fashion in various disciplines, such as sociology, psychology, art history, philosophy, and aesthetics.[3]

Given those studies, it is evident that one of the key features of fashion is newness since the newness is not only the result of constant change but also the motive for constant change. It is the central element of fashion and has built the aesthetics of newness. Kant believed what makes fashion popular is a novelty.[4] Gabriel Tarde defined the age of fashion as the age when the new is supreme.[5] Walter Benjamin argued that fashion would bring the newest creations in each season.[6] In Henri Lefebvre's reading of Baudelaire, fashion is "the most ephemeral expression of innovation for innovation's sake".[7] This definition echoed Dwight Robinson's writing that fashion "is the pursuit of novelty for its own sake".[8] And for George Darwin, the son of Charles Darwin, fashion is "the love for novelty".[9] Thus, just like Lars Svendsen summarized, "practically all fashion theorists stress 'the new.'"[10]

However, it is important to note that 'newness' can be used in different dimensions. And not all of those meanings are the equivalent to the 'newness' in fashion's change. According to Colin Campbell, there are three different kinds of 'new': the 'newly created' or 'fresh', the 'innovative' or 'improved', and the 'novel' or 'unfamiliar'. The 'newly created' or 'fresh' is opposite of the 'old'. It is only used in the dimension of time. For example, in the sentence 'I bought a *new* dress yesterday', the 'new' has no relationship to the style, the color, the fabric, or the function of the dress. It only indicates a dress just bought or newly produced. In modern society, almost everyone

---

[2] For example, the first sentence of Lipovetsky's *The Empire of Fashion* (Gilles Lipovetsky, *The Empire of Fashion: Dressing Modern Democracy*, trans. Catherine Porter /Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1994/, 3) is "the question of fashion is not a fashionable one among intellectuals". In the preface of *Fashion: A Philosophy*, Svendsen pointed out that "fashion has been virtually ignored by philosophers" (Lars Svendsen, *Fashion: A Philosophy*, trans. John Irons /London: Reaktion Books, 2006/, 7). And Karen Hanson even published a paper titled the "Philosophical Fear of Fashion" (Karen Hanson, "Dressing down Dressing up – The Philosophic Fear of Fashion," *Hypatia* 5, 2 /1990/: 107–21).

[3] For some useful studies on fashion theorists, see: Michael Carter, *Fashion Classics: From Carlyle to Barthes* (Oxford, New York: Berg, 2003); Kim K. P. Johnson et al., *Fashion Foundations: Early Writings on Fashion and Dress* (Oxford, New York: Berg, 2003); Ulrich Lehmann, *Tigersprung: Fashion and Modernity* (Massachusetts, London: The MIT Press, 2000).

[4] Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 143.

[5] Gabriel Tarde, *The Laws of Imitation* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1903), chapter 7.

[6] Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, ed. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), 64.

[7] Henri Lefebvre, *Introduction to Modernity*, trans. John Moore (London and New York: Verso, 1995), 171.

[8] Dwight E. Robinson, "Fashion Theory and Product Design," *Harvard Business Review* 36 (November–December 1958), 127. Quoted in George B. Sproles, and Leslie Davis Burns, *Changing Appearances: Understanding Dress in Contemporary Society* (New York: Fairchild Publications, 1994), 28.

[9] George H. Darwin, "Development in Dress," in *Fashion Foundations: Early Writings on Fashion and Dress*, eds. Kim K. P. Johnson, Susan J. Torntore, and Joanne B. Eicher (Oxford, New York: Berg, 2003), 97.

[10] Svendsen, *Fashion: A Philosophy*, 25.

would buy 'new' things or 'fresh' things, such as food, clothes, and other daily necessities. Nonetheless, this type of consumption is not following fashion, it is just the act of covering our basic needs. The second meaning of 'new', the 'innovation' or 'improved', is used in the dimension of efficiency and capacity. It is relevant to the product's quality. For instance, iPhone X is newer than iPhone 7 because of more pixels. The 'new' in this sense is closer to fashion than the 'new' as 'newly created' because it has been beyond our basic needs. However, it is still not the 'new' which motivates fashion's change. The intention of 'innovation' is to improve the function pragmatically, far from being innovation 'for its own sake'. The third meaning of 'new', the 'novel' or 'unfamiliar', is used in the dimension of personal experience. Regardless of whether a product is newly created or worn out, whether it has been improved functionally or not if someone has never seen this product before, it is a novel product for him/her. The 'novelty' is the 'newness' that embodies in fashion. It is relevant to the individual's feeling of unfamiliar, rather than to any objective standards. Therefore, it is 'for its own sake'. And to be more precise, the aesthetics of fashion is not just the aesthetics of newness but the aesthetics of novelty, the aesthetics of the sense of unfamiliarity.

Whereas, the novelty would be exhausted easily during consumption as we could become familiar with the commodity in a very short time. It can be argued that the novelty would disappear at the moment of a purchase being made.[11] Thus, fashion has to endlessly produce 'new' novelties to maintain its own existence. Undoubtedly, the most direct method of producing novelty is designing entirely new styles. But actually, there are multiple approaches to achieve the aim. With the development of fashion culture, the dominant method for producing the sense of novelty has also been changed from creating newness to forgetting newness.

Methods of producing novelty
Creating and borrowing

From the late 19th to the early 20th century, in the early stage of the modern fashion system,[12] the most common method to produce novelty was to create some items entirely new to embrace the new millennium, or to borrow foreign elements which were unfamiliar for most fashion customers at that time. And it's worth noting that, the borrowing of foreign elements is not just in terms of geography, but also of technology, discipline, gender, etc.

---

[11] Colin Campbell, "The Desire for the New: Its Nature and Social Location as Presented in Theories of Fashion and Modern Consumerism," in *Consuming Technologies: Media and Information in Domestic Spaces*, ed. Roger Silverstone and Eric Hirsch (London: Routledge, 1994), 52–56.

[12] Most fashion theorists agree that fashion emerged in late 14th century. However, fashion before the 20th century differs greatly from fashion nowadays. According to Kawamura, the former is the fashion phenomenon, the latter one is the fashion system. And this paper focuses more on the fashion system than fashion phenomenon. Cf. Yuniya Kawamura, *The Japanese Revolution in Paris Fashion* (Oxford, New York: Berg, 2004).

Paul Poiret's Orientalism design is a typical example of both creating and borrowing geographically. On the one hand, freeing women from corsets was an innovation to some degree. On the other hand, the eastern style harem trousers, sack dresses and hobble skirts brought exoticism into western daily life. Both brought a feeling of the unfamiliar. Chanel's design is another example of both creating and borrowing. Although short hairstyles, jersey knit suits, straight-line skirts were all-new creations, they also can be regarded as borrowing from masculine styles. Vionnet's famous bias-cut gowns were the technological creations, as well as the borrowing from Greek culture. Schiaparelli borrowed inspiration from artist Dali, and created the remarkable Lobster Dress and Shoe Hat. The collaboration with artists, or in other words, the borrowing from artworks, can also be found in many other designs, such as Robe Mondrian, the UT collections of Uniqlo.

Undoubtedly, creating and borrowing are the most thorough methods to produce novelty, since the novelty they produced is virtually externally determined, meaning we can find some objective criteria for evaluating the degree of novelty relatively. However, as the pace of fashion change is increasingly accelerating, the creation in a strict sense would be nearly impossible. Even those pioneering designers mentioned above had borrowed foreign elements to varying degrees. Hence, comparing to creation and borrowing in a large-scale, modifying and repeating the old form would be more efficient to produce a sense of unfamiliarity.

Modifying and repeating

After the Second World War, with the rise of the ready-to-wear clothing industry, the fashion system circulated much faster. However, fashion change at this stage was not about creating brand new items. On the contrary, since some classical designs were confirmed, fashion companies would maintain their styles or signatures to protect brand identity. Many designers would insist on their basic elements, such as the hourglass silhouette of Dior's new look, the straight cut lines of Chanel's suits, the loose shape of Issey Miyake's designs, etc. Thus, in each new season, what is new is more about unfamiliar details such as different colors, fabrics, pockets, buttons, rather than a whole novel look. Even those subcultural fashions, which seem like entirely new creations, would not change dramatically every year. By modifying details of previous designs, we could readily promote the change of fashion. Repeating is another efficient way to produce novelty. Since the sense of novelty is determined by our personal experiences, we would feel unfamiliar with those old-fashioned things again as time passed by. As Georg Simmel said, like all phenomena, fashion "tends to conserve energy", and the most economical means to endeavor for change is "repeatedly returns to the old forms" which have been forgotten, hence, fashion became cyclical.[13] There are always some once old-fashioned items re-staged as a new fashion. Although fashion culture can be regarded as a game of reincarnation, it does not mean that

---

[13] Georg Simmel, "Fashion," *American Journal of Sociology* 62, 6 (1957): 557.

fashion would repeat the old form accurately. Repeating and modifying always stand shoulder to shoulder. Fashion "wilfully cites any style from the past in a novel incarnation", and the appearance of fashion "is renewed by using past elements".[14] The new fashion is like a familiar stranger, it is always existing in the in-between space between familiar and unfamiliar.

Taken Svendsen's words, the creating and borrowing is 'a logic of replacement', while the modifying and repeating is 'a logic of supplementation'. And from the late 20th century, the 'logic of supplementation' has become the dominant logic of fashion change.[15]

Forgetting

From another perspective, it can be argued that in the 'logic of supplementation', the speed of fashion change is not only relevant to the efficiency of citing from the past, but also to how quick we can become familiar with those unfamiliar, and then forget those familiar objects. Thus, the logic of modifying and repeating might evolve into the logic of *forgetting*. From creating to forgetting, a novelty in fashion has transformed from externally determined into internally determined and moving to the direction of self-deception determined. There are no objective criteria we can use for differentiating the old and the new anymore. In the future, we might have to deceive ourselves into believing 'I have never seen this before', or 'it is different' in order to preserve the feeling of novelty and to maintain the existence of fashion.

It is widely accepted that, in the context of consumerism, the circulation of fashion is constantly speeding up. This implies that we can easily forget the fashion of yesterday. It is not because we suffer from amnesia, but we have unconsciously made the choice to forget. On the one hand, dazzling commodities would accelerate the rate of forgetting as novel items emerging every day. Unfamiliar novel things are always nearby to induce us to abandon what we already own. On the other hand, the media also has the power to alter our personal judgments of novelty. In traditional society, our judgments of novelty are more about the object itself. For example, 'a dress is a *novel* garment' indicates that a dress is *physically* different. However, in modern society, or consumer society, the reference of our judgments is not only to physical features but also symbolic significances. Novelty is not only the characteristic of things but also of meanings. As Jean Baudrillard said, fashion is the "production of meaning"; it is driven by meaning.[16] For instance, baggy jeans could become a novel design simply by changing its name to 'boyfriend jeans', or 'dad jeans' in recent years, but actually, the shapes, the cut lines, the fabrics, the details all remain unchanged

---

[14] Ulrich Lehmann, "Tigersprung: Fashion History," in *The Power of Fashion: About Design and Meaning*, ed. Jan Brand and José Teunissen (Arnhem: ArtEZPress, 2006), 47.

[15] Svendsen, *Fashion: A Philosophy*, 33.

[16] Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, trans. Charles Levin (St. Louis, Mo.: Telos Press, 1981), 79.

virtually. Wearing baggy jeans just indicates casual, leisure and comfortable, while the 'boyfriend jeans' might imply gender equality, and 'dad jeans' signify vintage styles, dedicated to working and even family.

However, those meanings or names are not connected with specific items eternally; combinations of things and meanings fade with time. Almost all of those meanings are temporary interpretations made by mass media such as fashion magazines, advertisements, movies, social media, etc. They persuade us to believe everything we own has been old, and there is always something different waiting for us ahead. They urge us to forget that which we bought yesterday and to buy something new today. They have stimulated our desires for novelty, and constantly produce new novelty by elucidating to satisfy our desires.

Conclusion

The aesthetics of fashion can be named the aesthetics of novelty to some degree since novelty is concurrent with change. As discussed above, with the acceleration of changes in fashion, the method of how fashion produces novelty has gone through a process as follows: creating something brand new, borrowing foreign elements, modifying details, repeating the forgotten old, and forgetting what is still new. And the novelty has gone through a process from externally determined to internally determined and moving to the direction of self-deception determined. In the early stage of fashion, the reason why we have the feeling of novelty is that we see something unfamiliar, but now the reason would be we have forgotten what we saw before and see some meanings unfamiliar.

However, it is vital to note that this process is a *logical sequence* rather than a *temporal sequence*. On the one hand, even today fashion designers are still able to produce novelty by creating new items, especially with the help of some new technologies and materials such as 3D print and high-tech fabrics. On the other hand, modifying and repeating are also methods used in the early stage of the fashion system. Although it is uncertain how far the fashion system can go, it is certain that the logic of fashion has changed in a sense with the development of fashion's change.

Reference

Baudrillard, Jean. *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, translated by Charles Levin. St. Louis, Mo.: Telos Press, 1981.

Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project*, translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002.

Campbell, Colin. "The Desire for the New: Its Nature and Social Location as Presented in Theories of Fashion and Modern Consumerism." In *Consuming Technologies: Media and Information in Domestic Spaces*, edited by Roger Silverstone and Eric Hirsch, 46–64. London: Routledge, 1994.

Carter, Michael. *Fashion Classics: From Carlyle to Barthes*. Oxford, New York: Berg, 2003.

Crane, Diana. "Fashion in Science: Does it Exist?" *Social Problems* 16, 4 (1969): 433–41. doi: 10.2307/799952

Darwin, George H. "Development in Dress." In *Fashion Foundations: Early Writings on Fashion and Dress*, edited by Kim K. P. Johnson, Susan J. Torntore, and Joanne B. Eicher, 97–100. Oxford and New York: Berg, 2003.

Hanson, Karen. "Dressing down Dressing up – The Philosophic Fear of Fashion." *Hypatia* 5, 2 (1990): 107–21.

Johnson, Kim K. P., Susan J. Torntore, and Joanne B. Eicher, eds. *Fashion Foundations: Early Writings on Fashion and Dress*. Oxford, New York: Berg, 2003.

Kant, Immanuel. *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, translated by Robert B. Louden. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Kawamura, Yuniya. *The Japanese Revolution in Paris Fashion*. Oxford, New York: Berg, 2004.

Kawamura, Yuniya. *Fashion-ology: An Introduction to Fashion Studies*. Oxford, New York: Berg, 2005.

Lefebvre, Henri. *Introduction to Modernity*, translated by John Moore. London, New York: Verso, 1995.

Lehmann, Ulrich. *Tigersprung: Fashion and Modernity*. Massachusetts, London: The MIT Press, 2000.

Lehmann, Ulrich. "Tigersprung: Fashion History." In *The Power of Fashion: About Design and Meaning*, edited by Jan Brand and José Teunissen, 42–66. Arnhem: ArtEZPress, 2006.

Lipovetsky, Gilles. *The Empire of Fashion: Dressing Modern Democracy*, translated by Catherine Porter. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1994.

Tarde, Gabriel. *The Laws of Imitation*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1903.

Simmel, Georg. "Fashion." *American Journal of Sociology* 62, 6 (1957): 541–58.

Sproles, George B. and Leslie Davis, Burns. *Changing Appearances: Understanding Dress in Contemporary Society*. New York: Fairchild Publications, 1994.

Svendsen, Lars. *Fashion: A Philosophy*, translated by John Irons. London: Reaktion Books, 2006.