
THE GODLIKE PROMISE OF DEEP FASHION

What do designers mean when they say they make “democratic” fashion? There seems to be an overlap between cheap and accessible fashion and the idea of democracy in the general discourse. The idea is that on-trend garments at an affordable price point offer the consumer a choice reminiscent of the democratic vote. Now anyone will be able to “vote with their dollars,” so this means consumption is directly democratic.

It is easy to criticize this way of thinking. Not only are the votes unequal, where the rich have more votes than the poor, but there is also a general lack of legitimate channels to influence those in power in

the system. Even with social media, there is no authority holding the powerful accountable, and few ways to organize and unite as consuming “citizens.”

There may also be problems with how fashion, as a mark of exclusivity, is at odds with the idea of democracy as being inclusive. Not everyone is served by fashion, even if it would be cheap, even if we all dress in the morning. There are sizes, proportions, abilities, age groups, and other configurations of appearance that are not included and thus have no avenue to make their voice heard in the system of fashion. As cruel as it might seem, it may also be that the general conception of what counts

as “fashion” is based on excluding people: fashion is not something for the wannabees, the losers, or the unattractive.

But if we were to make fashion deeper and more democratic, how should we think? It is not enough to think of voting. That is a too shallow conception of what the democratic promise entails. The potential of democracy is something much more, and it is radical at its root. It means that each person can work with society as a whole. Everyone has the potential to shape the world beyond the assumptions and limits inherited from the past. In a democracy, we can all participate in changing the parameters of our social existence. Governing their lives, people can influence and rethink the shared conditions of existence in togetherness. Democracy says; life can be radically different. This call is no small thing. It is a powerful potentiality every citizen has within reach. We often forget that democracy is this radical promise. It enables citizens to radically rethink the political and what society is. A democratic fashion must allow its users to remake what fashion is, not merely picking what decrees to follow.

At the heart of democracy lies an unfettered agency. It is the promise of life being anti-fate: the future is ours to make. Fashion can be an essential part of such mak-

ing of the future. The superficial changes of seasons and collections offer the potential to change much more in self-governance and aesthetic life in society. In a real democracy, change must be made internal to social life. Fashion, as a call from unknown futures, can offer the fullest pragmatic rebirth of possibility. Fashion weakens our dependence on what became before. It offers each new moment a path out of the reliance on the past. Like the sirens, in the storm of the moment, fashion whispers a calling to change not only your life but our lives together.

We must accept nothing less of a democratic fashion. Such fashion must be more than limitless self-expression. It must offer capacity, agency, and capabilities to rethink a life of pluralities. But we must also think of agency bound to risk and vulnerability, not merely domination over fate. To point to Roberto Unger’s *The Self Awakened* (2007), the promise of democracy is sovereignty based on reciprocity and vulnerability; “The road to self-possession and self-construction passes through a selective lowering of defenses, the creation of zones of heightened reciprocal vulnerability.”(53)

Democracy is to celebrate agency over structure. The purpose of social arrangements must not be to order people as

followers but to bring about the vitality of more godlike forms of living. In life, as well as fashion, vitality is all we have. Democracy means to break away from arrangements of life that seek to diminish our hunger for life. Becoming a mere follower means denying the quality most valuable to us; our appetite for life. The promise of a deep fashion must never be anything less than amplifying the qualities that make us godlike.

As Unger points out, democracy is a form of radical experimentalism. It leaves the future open for rearrangements by the citizens. Its purpose must be to make its citizens aware and interested in taking part in these rearrangements. This interest in the shape of society is essential to democracy, as Unger (2007: 242) suggests;

“Under democracy, this interest becomes paramount, for democracy grants the ordinary men and women the power to re-imagine and to remake the social order. That is why under democracy prophecy speaks louder than memory. That is why democrats discover that the roots of a human being lie in the future rather than in the past. In a democracy, the school should speak for the future, not for the state or for the family, giving the child the instruments with which to rescue itself from the biases of its family, the interests of its class, and the illusions of its epoch.”

Democracy allows its power-sharers not merely to vote for their new master and preserve the constitution. The promise of democracy lies in the possibility to rethink the social arrangements of the future. It offers room amongst citizens to tinker with reality. A reality not set by what is inherited from the past. “To let the future go free would show more than power. It would show wisdom.” (2007: 242)

If taken seriously, fashion can be a venue to revitalize how we also imagine society. Fashion is the radical promise of living in the moment, offering participants the agency to take part, to shape their life towards their ambitions and dreams. Under the current industrial model of fashion and ready-to-wear, the focus is to fit consumers into sellable dress items. The radical promise of fashion must be so much more than that. As Unger reminds us, “it is easier to bring a group of people to order than to bring them to life. The largest ambition of politics is not to help bring them in order, it is to help bring them to life.” (2007: 182) A democratic fashion must be nothing less than making people more alive. We must accept nothing less from a democratic fashion. True democracy offers the radical pragmatic promise of an awakened self; “Imagination over dogma, vulnerability over serenity, aspiration over obligation, comedy over tragedy, hope

over experience, prophecy over memory, surprise over repetition, the personal over the impersonal, time over eternity, life over everything.” (237)

Routine politics and common fashion merely concern the distribution of goods and shuffling between institutional frameworks. Routine never challenges arrangements. Even under the signifiers of revolution, people are only allowed to tinker with reformist programs. As Unger warns, too often, a revolution merely humanizes an order we cannot reimagine how to change for the better.

Deep fashion must engage the radical promise of fashion can be. If taken seriously, this means fulfilling the radical and pragmatic promise of a democratic fashion. Like a real democracy, fashion has its animating goal of making us more godlike, making sure we do not act as if dead while we are still alive. This means breaking the deadening routine of inherited habits to lift the spirits and practices of life towards the stuff of dreams. A deep fashion must make us dream harder.

At the prospect of fashion lies the potential for more godlike agency. Deep fashion must be nothing less than;

- *A possibility to inhabit more worlds than we are given.*
- *Equipping a self with a masked multitude with unfathomable depths.*
- *Seeing time as inclusively possible to inhabit and change.*
- *The everyday and ordinary offering as much promise as the imagination.*

Now, designers, do not let us die too young. It is up to you to help make the democratic promise of fashion an intrinsic part of our shared vitality. Please do not ask us to follow, but offer us the agency to live more fully. In the end, fashion must be that *spark of life that animates the gods within us.*

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References;

Unger, Roberto (2007) *The Self Awakened*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press
