The game of fashion and LOOKBOOK.nu

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Fashion is full of paradoxes. Certainly one of the most profound of these is how we try to express individuality using ready-made objects whose meanings are primarily created outside of ourselves. We assemble an outfit to express our modest uniqueness: individual but at the same time not too individual. We try to say something personal through fashion, yet it can never be totally autonomous. Similarly we cannot have our own personal language; it has somehow to be shared to work as communication. Fashionable expression is thus stuck in between the heteronomous process of creation as a communication tool and the autonomous will of the wearer to express something personal.

Traditionally fashion has been a totally ready-made phenomenon, usually dictated from above according to linear logic or imitation and repetition. Subcultures and styles that bubbled up to the top have been defined by leading personalities within their genres. This type of system functions much like a radio antenna, broadcasting fashion to everyone; each consumer can tune in to a brand, style frequency or subculture pirate station. Some have better reception than others, but every consumer is a passive receiver. Only the active designer, stylist or magazine is a transmitter. Although this image of fashion has worked well over the last centuries, something else seems to be happening today. Fashion seems to be acting in less linear, more self-organized ways, and with the advent of the internet new ecological niches have emerged. Fashion is not primarily diffused and repeated in a cause-and-effect manner, as when we directly imitate something we see in an image in a magazine. But it still follows basic rules that give it an organic quality and dynamic characteristics. Fashion follows a sort of logic in the way it spreads between people. It acts like a meme, a gene-like unit of information or ‘virus of the mind’, to use Richard Dawkins’s term,1 or like an epidemic, to use contemporary advertising jargon.

If we want to study this type of viral fashion, a useful model is the editor-less style community of the website LOOKBOOK.nu, where everyday fashionistas upload images of their latest outfits and comment on each other’s ways of dressing and modelling. Here the roles of designer, stylist, model, producer and consumer are blurred, and all community members have many ways to participate in the creation of new looks, which spread on the forum. Images and outfits are tagged with information such as brand and colour, and this information becomes a searchable code for each look. If we were to construct a taxonomy of LOOKBOOK as a living being, this tagged information would be the genotype of the look, its genetic constitution. Its photograph would the phenotype, or the look’s observable characteristics.

What grows at LOOKBOOK.nu is organic fashion, a special life form of cultural production and style transmission that acts as a living system. There is no central control, but rather a constant drift of new turbulence and flow. It is something like a swarm of fashionistas creating their own user-generated magazine made out of interactions and exchanges rather than styles being funnelled through editors and other gatekeepers. Yet the inner mechanisms
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of fashion remain the same, as it seems that fashion spreads between us following basic protocols as well as unwritten inter-subjective social commands. Greatly simplified, these commands can be formulated as basic rules or laws. There are only two modes: in or out. The basic rules of fashion could be described as follows:

1. If the fashion expression is too unique, it is not fashion (it is too original).
2. If the fashion expression is too popular, it is out of fashion (it is too popular).
3. If an accessible status group wears the fashion, it is in fashion (it functions by imitating the ones we like and differing from the ones we dislike).
4. Fashion expressions are somehow contagious, but at the same time fashion cannot be too original or too popular (as in rules 1 and 2).

As I was thinking about these basic rules of fashion, I was surprised by how much they came to reflect a game simulation I have been fascinated with for a long time, a simple game but with consequences so vast that they are challenging to comprehend. This is John Horton Conway’s ‘Game of Life’.

The ‘Game of Life’ generates complexity by means of very simple rules. From simple combinations of binary data, starting from an elementary configuration, unexpected results emerge. Since its publication in 1970 the game, as a generator of so-called ‘cellular automata’, has fascinated mathematicians and biologists. It is a game of computer-generated artificial biology, resembling an evolution of life through uncomplicated protocols, visually playing with emergence and self-organization. Even with simple rules complex patterns arise, including rudimentary organisms or life forms. By following the patterned behaviours of cells and neurons, theorists such as John Holland and Daniel Dennett have argued that the simple rules of these cellular automata can explain how complex organisms like ourselves, and even free will, can evolve over vast oceans of time. The most intricate system can evolve from extremely simple micro-repetitions of protocols; there is no need for an overarching mind for order to emerge out of what seems to be chaos.
The game board consists of a two-dimensional square grid, each cell of which is considered to be either ‘live’ or ‘dead’. The game-play is very simple. You only play in solitary mode, as it is actually a zero-player game; you merely set up the initial configuration and then let the rules determine the fate of your life form. The game is in this sense the initial seed; the simulation follows its evolution, with every iteration or generation re-applying the rules to the new form. Thus Conway’s game is a simple starting point for life simulation, and with every initial configuration new patterns arise over time. The rules are as follows:

1. A cell dies of loneliness if it has one or zero neighbours (‘death by isolation’).
2. A cell dies of overcrowding if it has four or more neighbours (‘death by overcrowding’).
3. A live cell with either two or three neighbours survives to the next generation (the cell is ‘stable’).
4. A new cell is born if it has exactly three neighbours (‘birth’).

These simple rules applied to various starting configurations evolve into unexpected forms over generations, and although they show certain traits and characteristics, the simple rules continue to apply. Some evolve to become stable but oscillating ‘blinkers’, while others move around or crawl over the grid and are known as ‘gliders’.

The evolution of such patterns is interesting to watch, but yet more complex patterns also emerge. Some formations move in repetitive patterns while giving birth to independent life forms. These patterns produce offspring! Simple patterns of black and white create ‘life’, almost like cells. New life forms shoot out of their bodies and are called ‘guns’. One example is the Gosper Glider Gun, which produces a new living glider every fifteen generations. Such a pattern literally illustrates the viral diffusion of ideas or intensities, new memes that emerge via interactions involving simple protocols.

To understand the connection between the rules of fashion and Conway’s ‘Game of Life’, we can turn to the French sociologist Gabriel Tarde, who wrote extensively on social and economic psychology and the laws of imitation. According to Tarde, social relations emerge through interactions between people, through close social imitations and their metamorphosis, which in turn become innovations. He used an analytic resource that he called ‘idea germs’, which at their full potential, at the moment of innovation, create ‘vibrations’.1 The Tardian social imitations are just like cell multiplications or the firing of neurons between nerves, transmitting information via synapses. Tarde calls such transmissions ‘rays of imitation’.2 These vibrations are pure difference, pure intensity. To put it bluntly, we can say that they are either on or off, black or white. As such they resonate well with Pierre Bourdieu’s notion that ‘[f]ashion is the latest fashion, the latest difference’.3

We could say that this is what fashion is: the latest intensity, the latest firing of social life and social micro-imitation. It does not require much imagination to see an analogy between this viral approach and fashion, itself signifying a social vibration of status and desire that dies over time, usually in a season or two. We come to be immune to last season’s fashion, just like the risen fatigue threshold of a recently fired nerve. Indeed most of us have some ‘dead’ garments buried in the back of the wardrobe that once were highly vivid, but somehow died a quick death as the wave of vibration passed by.

Thus we can see the game of fashion, or the LOOKBOOK fashion system, as a viral ecology of living parts. This is not a mechanical system of simplified cause-and-effect relationships, of designer dictations and passive, blind followers. In the living system of LOOKBOOK, every actor is both sender and receiver, and as the virus mutates fashion bends and is constantly reinterpreted. It is a flat field of two-way agency and pure viral intensity, yet it follows the playful rules of cellular diffusion and emergence.

If we shift our focus from the top-down linear diffusion model and regard fashion as a phenomenon
of small micro-repetitions, imitations of the latest looks firing throughout social networks, we can adopt a new approach to sustainability in fashion. As before, the overall system of fashion, the infrastructure of producers, retailers and media, has a vital role to play. After all, they stand behind the main production mechanism of clothes and thus have the biggest environmental impact.

However, with the help of a viral perspective, we can also see how to intercept the micro-repetitions and social milieu where imitation happens and engage change there. This means that we should try to spread the actions of sustainability where the act of imitation happens: between people at ground level, between local neighbours in the imitative grid and among friends and fans on social media platforms such as LOOKBOOK. With small tactical interventions at a personal micro-level, we can build self-esteem and introduce more skills and knowledge by engaging users in participatory co-creation and by empowering ‘prosumers’ – producing consumers – through co-design and open workshops. Skills and knowledge can make rates of imitation oscillate differently between people. Such tactics might not reach the top-down system of fashion, but spread change and empowerment virally. Even at this scale we are not outside the realm of fashion – we tap into the energy it produces for new needs and send new signals through its rays of imitation. Fashionistas can never be totally independent; that would not be fashion (remember fashion rule 1). However, we can make them realize how they are interdependent, and how new communities and sustainable practices can be built by means of the Game of Fashion.

So, following the ideas of Gabriel Tarde, fashion has no autonomous innovators; it has no overall system through which to master us. All fashion is a contagion, a pestilence, a viral transmission, a firing of interconnected neurons in constant mutation. Fashion is a germ capital, rays of imitation spreading like wildfire between our resonating minds, actions and bodies. It is as if fashion has a life of its own, parallel to ours as humans, in which the latest memes make us temporarily dizzy with trend fever. We are the vectors of fashion. But this also means that we have the power to affect how it flows through us to others. We can tune it towards more sustainable agendas every time the imitation replicates between us.

Let us, then, re-examine the application of the rules. A fashionista does not need to be autonomous to feel alive. On the contrary, a fashionista feels alive by abiding by the rules, and by being engulfed in the firing intensity of the social game, by being highly connected rather than disconnected. This is the unpredictable game that is fashion, this vibrant celebration of life. The game is indeed played on a ‘field’, as Bourdieu suggested. And it only refers to the last season or, to use the terms of the ‘Game of Life’, the last ‘generation’. If it was skinny jeans last season, now it is flares. If it was white last season, now it is black. It might not always be that simple, but at least we all know the rules: it should neither be too original nor too popular. Fire up the neurons, here we go! What a lovely game to play.

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