



Capitalism of Bodies: the Colonisation of Digital Beauty*

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This article questions the trompe-l'oeil of fashion's variety. It demonstrates that taste is increasingly homogenised by examining the foundations of manipulation, the proliferation of global brands, the search for cross-cultural convergence, and communication based on the appearance of "pure happiness". The capitalism of bodies colonises the gaze and habits of consumers. Digital beauty has colonised daily life, deregulated purchasing practices and unified tastes on a global scale.

Keywords: Fashion, Industry, Capitalism, Consumption, Body, Colonisation.

In 1992, in the *Power of the Press* episode of the BBC documentary series *The Look*, a speaker said: «Nobody knows what's nice and what's not». The consumer had to be persuaded, told what he liked so that he would sacrifice his money to the latest trend. This documentary explores the reasons why the fashion industry has become a major international cultural and societal hub. Several reasons are mentioned: technological advances in telecommunications, the globalisation of markets and culture, the goal of selling products inspired by popular culture images, mainly American, enabled by the high quality visual power of satellite, cable and other new media. Thanks to the diversification of media channels, trends are cleverly and strategically promoted at an increasing rate. Propagated for months, they remain relevant for about a year to the average consumer. But their lifespan is constantly diminishing. In fact, it is the

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“trend of the trend” that is needed to generate additional sales and increase profitability in all sectors. And if the novelty is in the limelight, it is because it is exhibited by authorities with a growing role¹.

Fashion deserves its bad reputation. It influences behaviour, bank accounts, jobs, urban planning and the media every day. Today, the sector is the symbol of a sick globalisation. Dictatorial and sprawling, the clothing industry has shaped consumer practices, further widening the gap between the wealthy and the modest classes. In the act of buying, impulse has supplanted reason. Of course, the question here is not to go back in time to the hunter-gatherers, and the democratisation of clothing has offered a comfort and a well-being that must be preserved. However, the methods and strategies for convincing people to buy more (and more), and the techniques of manipulation it entails, are not sufficiently known to historians. Above all, the state of the industry today cannot be attributed to its players of the last 40 years. The deep structure of the economic model based on the predation of resources goes back at least to the 15th and 16th centuries. This first globalisation was rapidly built around the English and French colonisation of the 17th century². Since then, it is the bodies that have been colonised.

The consumer body is a complex object of study. It must be studied at the crossroads of economics and marketing, social history and advertising, without omitting sociology and the history of techniques. This article proposes to put the consumer back at the heart of capitalism, the one who desires and buys. But his individuality tends to disappear behind sales strategies. The body has become a commodity like any other. Naturally ugly or imperfect, it is repaired, transformed, modified and forgotten, relegated to the background. The globalisation of appearances has thus announced the disappearance of individuality.

The link between the rise of capitalism and fashion is a reality that has strengthened during the last centuries. But the digital age allows signs to invade daily life, private apartments and the public sphere. No one can escape the temptation. We will examine the steps in the dynamics that lead to a world in which consumption seems inevitable. What are the means used by the brands to intrude into everyday life to the point of bruising the body?

In the first part of this article, we will investigate the foundations of manipulation and its consequences on the making, creation and homo-

¹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00h4xb0>.

² F. Braudel, *La dynamique du capitalisme* (1977), Flammarion, Paris 2018.

genisation of taste. Secondly, we will analyse the strategies implemented to convince potential customers to buy from two directions, communication and the promise of happiness. Finally, the transformation of bodies and practices will show to what extent brands have succeeded in invading bodies and colonising ways of living.

The foundations of manipulation and its consequences

The process of development of the clothing and fashion industry can be explained historically. When the European giants, France and England, had to clothe the thousands of men in their armies in the 17th century, entrepreneurs and small hands became active. It was the beginning of mass production, not mechanised, but efficient. In the backyards of London's backstreets and in the Parisian districts dedicated to crafts, waistcoats, jackets and shirts multiply, soon ready to reach the warehouses and to dress sailors and soldiers. Already, girls from rural areas were moving to the cities, where industrial work promised them a better future.

Fashion: a challenge for the evolution of capitalism

Mechanisation was supposed to improve the terrible working conditions. This was not the case. It was necessary to produce in greater quantities, to standardise, in the roar of the factory looms or in the maid's room. Productivity is not the result of technical innovations but of humane captivity or slavery³. It is imposed on the infamous sweatshops. Whatever their size, they are a particularly odious form of work, both morally and politically⁴. The growth of the textile industry has been based on aggressive pricing strategies since the 19th century. The price policy led to a reduction in expenditure. Excessive capitalism worsened the conditions of production. Friedrich Engels (1820-1895) explains that «the history of the proletariat in England begins with the invention of the steam engine and of machines for working cotton». According to Engels, the Industrial Revolution led to «a rapid fall in the price of all manufactured goods, the prosperity of trade and manufacture, the conquest of almost all unprotected foreign markets». But the new “national wealth” did not benefit everyone⁵.

³ A. Millet, *Le livre noir de la mode. Création, production, manipulation*, Les Pérégrines, Paris 2020, chap. 5.

⁴ T.E. Hoskins., *Stitched Up. The Anti-Capitalist Book of Fashion*, Pluto Press, London 2014.

⁵ F. Engels, *La situation de la classe ouvrière en Angleterre* (1845), trad. fr. Éditions sociales,

The rural exodus intensified the demographic pressure in industrial towns unable to accommodate the new populations in a decent way. The sanitary conditions in the workshops led to serious illnesses, particularly tuberculosis, also known as “tailor’s disease”. The development of the garment industry was also punctuated by humane catastrophes, such as the fire that broke out on 25 March 1911 in the Triangle Shirtwaist factory in New York. The situation was dramatic: no emergency exit for the workers, an overcrowded workshop, locked or blocked doors and windows closed with iron bars. The result was 146 dead and 71 wounded.

Therefore, the ills caused by this sector are not recent. They seem to be at the very foundation of the textile industry, which aimed to produce more, at lower cost (that is the problem). For the social scientist, it is now a question of understanding the stages in the construction of the “fashion-capitalism” couple that is inseparable from daily life.

From Bourdieu to Baudrillard, a litany of commonplaces scans the society of the second half of the 20th century, about the reproduction of the elites, the male domination, and the culture being in the hands of the bourgeoisie. But it is necessary to re-situate the fundamental class issues and the remarkable evolution of capitalism in the 20th century. For Michel Clouscard (1928-2009), a contemporary of Bourdieu and Baudrillard who is too often forgotten in academic bibliographies and intellectual debates, the «markets of desire» were set up to save capitalism from its crises⁶. In 1981, he described such a «neo-fascism» as the ultimate degree of the colonisation of souls. In particular, he points to the importance of the Marshall Plan and May 1968 in this «supreme stage» of imperialism⁷. This striking power, this conquest of the commercial world, is complex, but it seems (to me) to take root particularly during periods of crisis. How does capitalism convince people to consume more and more? By implementing effective persuasion techniques capable of reaching a maximum number of future customers.

To obtain the consent of the people, rather than using force as in totalitarian regimes, the United States invented public relations. The word sounds better than “propaganda”. It was Edward Bernays⁸ (1891-1995),

Paris 1960, p. 3.

⁶ H. Marcuse, *L'Homme unidimensionnel* (1964), Les éditions de Minuit, Paris 1968.

⁷ M. Clouscard, *Le capitalisme de la séduction. Critique de la social-démocratie libertaire*, Éditions sociales, Paris 1981.

⁸ E. Bernays, *Propaganda. Comment manipuler l'opinion en démocratie* (1928), Zones/La Découverte, Paris 2007.

a “maverick technician” in the first half of the 20th century, who developed a method that is still in use today. Originally, it was to convince Americans, hostile to the idea of entering the war, to send their armies to Europe in 1917. From the work of Gustave Le Bon (1841-1931), he remembered that “to know the art of impressing the crowds is to know the art of governing them”. He then set up a mental arsenal to promote consumption. Considering that crowds are unable to think rationally, he chose leaders to act as preachers: journalists, film stars, advertisers, press agents and psychologists. He applied this method to various consumer products. Its aim is to create a fantasy around an object and to focus the crowd on the feeling it causes. In short, it is necessary to convert the people to consumption, a new religion, and the customers into fanatics of their appearance. It is a way of channelling crowds, inventing goals and creating daily obsessions.

The idea dates back to the 19th century. Workers’ strikes, demonstrations and riots against the rise of industrial capitalism, which was causing pauperisation, were too dangerous for production. The masses must therefore be subdued so that the tug-of-war between them and the capitalists, the owners of the means of production, ceases. The simple idea is to get them to participate in and adhere to a model of society that they have always rejected. By buying, the citizen serves the prosperity of the industrialists. He has become a consumer who sacrifices his money not out of need, but out of desire. It was a total success. The crisis of 1929 could have brought and kneel down those industrial devils. It didn’t happen. Even Goebbels studied Bernays’ book closely and adapted it, unfortunately successfully, to Nazi objectives⁹. After the Second World War, the teenage market was used to broaden the customer base and to convince younger people of the benefits of consumption.

Among the most easily observable consequences of globalisation is the spread of brands on a global scale. Some are heirs, such as Chanel, Gucci, Yves Saint Laurent, Givenchy or Burberry, and build on stories established before modern globalisation¹⁰. Others have used globalisation as a springboard. This is the case of Giorgio Armani, which gained popularity by supplying Richard Gere’s wardrobe in the 1980 film *American Gigolo*. From then on, the brand grew, diversified and became

⁹ S. Aumercier, *Edward L. Bernays et la propagande*, in “Revue du MAUSS”, xxx, 2007, 2, pp. 452-69.

¹⁰ M. Haig, *Brand Royalty. How the World’s Top 100 Brands Thrive & Survive*, Kogan Page Publishers, London 2004.

a leader. Gianni Versace (1946-1997) was a master of global brand promotion. Among his many innovative tactics to bypass the leadership of traditional Italian houses, like Gucci, he used the faces of international models. He was largely responsible for the invention of the supermodels, and then used their image to become a global reference himself¹¹. Campaigns focused on glamour, theatricality, spectacles and after-parties, making the fashion industry a dream for the general public¹². Versace understood early on that globalisation was a tool to increase exposure.

In this context, the higher the advertising budgets, the more the brand value is reinforced in the eyes of consumers. Advertising strategies are diversifying and relying more and more on cultural media. As the example of Armani and *American Gigolo* shows, product placement is very effective. The inclusion in real life increases the consumer's ability to connect emotionally with the product. The jumper is no longer a printed fantasy, it becomes tangible, with a social life¹³. Product placement is a key aspect of the ideal promotional strategy¹⁴. The popular HBO series *Sex and the City* had a particularly positive impact on the Burberry and Jimmy Choo brands¹⁵. The image of Carrie, the main character, in a Burberry coat during an emotional scene, as well as her recurring purchases of shoes, were of great benefit to both brands. In one moment of television, a fictional character turned the old-fashioned image of Burberry plaid on its head. Today, brands are particularly attentive to social networks. The new trend setters, (called) the influencers, are immediately connected to customers. Consumer behaviour and satisfaction must now be analysed continuously. Decision-makers set their trends mainly through social media, while stylists rely on celebrities to create new trends based on the calendar of events¹⁶. Celebrities are key pillars of integrated marketing, as they promote multiple brands in tandem. A new breed of leader has emerged in the last 20 years. Bloggers and influencers—Instagram and

¹¹ Millet, *Le livre noir de la mode*, cit., chap. 2.

¹² W. Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture*, Vintage Books, New York 1993.

¹³ A. Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, Cambridge University Press, London and New York 1986.

¹⁴ N. Anguelov, *The Dirty Side of the Garment Industry. Fast Fashion and Its Negative Impact on Environment and Society*, CRC Press, Boca Raton, London and New York [2016], pp. 1-2.

¹⁵ M. Phan, R. Thomas, K. Heine, *Social Media and Luxury Brand Management: the Case of Burberry*, in "Journal of Global Fashion Marketing", 11, novembre 2011, 4, pp. 213-22.

¹⁶ L. Barnes, G. Lea-Greenwood, *Fast Fashioning the Supply Chain: Shaping the Research Agenda*, in "Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management", 3, 2006, pp. 259-71.

TikTok—are not supposed to be celebrities¹⁷. Nevertheless, they are close to the people because they are unknown and know success. Consumers then see them as normal people. This normality creates a bond of closeness¹⁸. Brands are developing virtual influencers, i.e. avatars. Technology, homogenisation and the virtual nature of social relationships continue to take hold. The rise of online shopping since the coronavirus confirms this dynamic.

Multi-branding gives credibility to the designer. Social media can promote flash styles throughout the year, without waiting for the September issue of “Vogue”. Retailers have adjusted accordingly outside the industry calendar. Designers also have to adapt to the fast pace of trends and fundamentally transform the very essence of their business.

Design: a cross-cultural convergence

The convergence of tastes and preferences has received a lot of attention and scepticism because it challenges the tradition of promotional management. The latter is based on the rationale that local tastes differ considerably from one region, country or continent to another, since cultural heritage creates differences. On the face of it, the advertising, particularly in the fashion sector, builds its campaigns on marketing that correctly identifies the tastes and preferences of the target market to tailor its message. This assumes that needs vary due to cultural differences¹⁹.

However, specialists are now focusing more on the factors of intercultural convergence, the result of communication that crosses borders. To create cultural capital, to weaken local characteristics and to replace them with uniform global preferences, companies rely on an «international brand architecture»²⁰. This is the coordinated distribution of several products under the same brand name, sold simultaneously in several markets. The question is whether the tastes of people in different countries are converging and whether this convergence has reached a critical mass of similarities.

¹⁷ A. Rocamora, *Mediatization and Digital Media in the Field of Fashion*, in “Fashion Theory”, XXI, 2017, 5, pp. 505-22.

¹⁸ K. de Perthuis, R. Findlay, *How Fashion Travels: The Fashionable Ideal in the Age of Instagram*, “Fashion Theory”, XXIII, 2019, 2, pp. 219-42.

¹⁹ G. Jones, *Beauty Imagined: A History of the Global Beauty Industry*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2010.

²⁰ S.P. Douglas, C.S. Craig, E.J. Nijssen, *Integrating Branding Strategy across Markets: Branding Strategy across Markets*, in “Journal of International Marketing”, IX, 2001, 2, p. 97-114.

This debate is fundamental, as social sciences often fight against Western ethnocentrism. Historically, advertisers were opposed to unify branding strategies. Firstly, they were convinced that customers wanted to be surveyed to be understood. Secondly, because of spatial frictions²¹, there would be a significant aesthetic separation in tastes and preferences²². Segmentation would therefore be paramount: to build a strong international brand architecture, a company's communication strategy should be based on a very high degree of segmentation. As a brand becomes more international, its communication becomes more segmented. Variety and difference should therefore be given priority. However, the ethnocentric approach as a global branding strategy defies these traditional theories of marketing and advertising. Tastes and preferences converge and are integrated into branding tactics. Possible commonalities between different global customers are amplified by brands and lead to the homogenisation of tastes.

From the end of the 1980s, a global consumer culture has been developing. It is based on the domination of a few transnational companies that manufacture and market the majority of consumer goods in the world. This situation is the result of the reduction of intra-brand competition, i.e. competition between brands belonging to the same parent company, as well as inter-brand competition, i.e. competition with brands outside the company. There is thus collusion in global marketing to limit the number of competitors that each company faces. Today, the reduction in the number of competitors in the market at company level is due to the establishment of global groups that are gradually buying up brands. Behind the apparent variety, there is a group homogenisation²³.

It is all a question of strength. The more popular a brand is, the more it can limit competition²⁴. By being present in the "emerging" countries, but also in the so-called developed countries, the brands capitalise on the feelings of inadequacy, isolation and cultural immateriality of the consumers, feelings that contribute to their adhesion. This leads to the desired convergence: the best way to control customer demands is still to dictate their needs rather than respond to them.

²¹ Economic term for the geographical and cultural distances between countries.

²² Anguelov, *The Dirty Side of the Garment Industry*, cit., pp. 35-6.

²³ A.D. Chandler, A. Chandler, *Strategy and Structure: Chapters in the History of the Industrial Enterprise*, M.I.T. Press, Cambridge 1962; N. Klein, *No Logo, Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies*, Picador, New York 1999.

²⁴ L.F.S. Wang, Y.-C. Wang, *Brand Proliferation and Inter-Brand Competition: The Strategic Role of Transfer Pricing*, in "Journal of Economic Studies", xxxv, 2008, 3, pp. 278-92.

In fashionable marketing, trend prediction is partly based on this convergence of tastes. The influence of the big fashion houses has diminished, as has that of the trend offices. The latter, places of analysis of future fashions, are at the crossroads of the pragmatism required to understand the clothing industry and the intellectual and artistic reflection required by the aesthetic expectations of customers. Their role is to anticipate and determine the next trends. These idea hunters must capture, think and conceptualise two or three years in advance of the future successes of the clothing industry. There are various profiles, often called “experts” – in design, communication, forecasting or marketing²⁵.

In recent decades, fashion retailers have used forecasting to assess consumer needs and desires. Agencies analysed data sets and sold cuts, colours, fabrics and accessories. Forecasts began about eighteen months before a product was sold and orders were placed a year in advance. Today, agencies use real-time data and “lead time” – the time from creation to distribution – has dropped below 30 days. The acceleration of trends and information flows has made the work of agencies increasingly complex: there is a need for constant immediacy and global analysis²⁶.

Uniqueness of Taste

During the 1980s, global brands gradually eliminated the costs of segmented advertising to create a more homogenised promotional platform. Previously, markets were targeted, well separated by geography, ethnicity and culture. But improved satellite communications and the spread of the US entertainment industry internationally have made the US the largest exporter of culture, or rather trends.

Films, television series, music, websites and magazine advertisements permeate national cultures. The lifestyle advocated is far removed from that in other parts of the world, including the industrialised Western countries. Specifically, the images show a much higher standard of living than the reality. After the break-up of the USSR, the East discovered the everyday life of the West – or at least a certain everyday life. As Martin Wolf writes in his book *Why Globalization Works*, «Oliver Twist has a television set»²⁷. Television programmes,

²⁵ R.L. Blaszczyk, B. Wubs, *The Fashion Forecasters. A Hidden History of Color and Trend Prediction*, Bloomsbury, London 2018.

²⁶ Millet, *Le livre noir de la mode*, cit., chap. 1.

²⁷ M. Wolf, *Why Globalization Works*, Yale University Press, New Heaven 2004.

advertisements and series create desires among the poorer segments of the people. This exchange of cultural information has turned into a product placement. Culture is now consumption. To become global, brands have adopted a commonly recognised language and core values that build a unique convergence of tastes, the result of exposure to standardised information that normalises images. In emerging countries, brands disseminate a fantasised global identity for people who feel excluded or marginalised because of their poverty. These images are therefore well received.

The creation of global brand equity relies on a unified promotional strategy. The face of the brand must be promoted based on global fame: this is what Gianni Versace did by employing top models. After his death in 1997, his sister Donatella became artistic director and chose Jennifer Lopez as the icon of the brand. She promoted the now cult Jungle Dress on the red carpet of the 42nd Grammy Awards. It was so successful that it was reissued for the same Jennifer Lopez by Donatella in 2020. Success breeds success. The influence of celebrities is now so great that they also create their clothes, perfumes and cosmetics, as shown in the cases of Britney Spears, Céline Dion or Kylie Jenner. When Versace released its bondage collection in 1992, the first reactions were disastrous. But Christy Turlington, Yasmeen Ghauri and Naomi Campbell gave credit where credit is due for widespread approval through advertising. Detractors are no match for famous faces. Anna Wintour, director of US “Vogue”, also harnesses the power of actresses as models because they convey emotion and dreams. Solicited by thousands of advertising messages, the consumer remembers an actress, seen shortly before in a very successful movie better than an unknown face that will be lost in the flood of information. Exposure to mass media reduces the need to create differentiated product images, the traditional mantra of transnational marketing. A single global image is sufficient if its spokesperson has a high international profile²⁸.

Whereas advertising has long been based on fantasy and novelty, it is now positioned on immediacy and real impact. This shift is driven by a change in economic behaviour. Indeed, when the mass has approved a product – ugly, beautiful, cheap, luxurious, whatever – the average consumer buys it. This is a new industrial psychology: the exhibition of the product persuades more than the product itself. As a result, design

²⁸ Millet, *Le livre noir de la mode*, cit., chap. 2.

– which is hardly mentioned when the fashion industry is mentioned – has been greatly modified: the convergence of tastes and preferences around the world has relegated materials, colours, shapes, patterns and silhouettes in the background. This is the result of decades of branding and advertising manipulation. Manipulation has its own alphabet and language which manifest themselves in slogans and images. However, the invasion of public and private spaces—with emails and cookies—is certainly the most intrusive technique.

Convincing: The Communication of Pure Happiness

Buying has become the key to happiness and success. It makes one beautiful and desirable. Shopping is no longer just a leisure activity: it is a value, a form of citizenship, because the consumer, by supporting economic growth, behaves like a true patriot. Behind these injunctions to consume, however, lies the imposition of unattainable body standards. But the permanent communication of the brands convinces the potential buyer.

Brands That mean Well

Brands have quickly understood the importance of good e-communication. The Swedish brand H&M spreads its slogan “Fashion and quality at the best price” all over the world. To enhance its image, it mainly uses co-branding and works with big names fashionable and celebrities such as Karl Lagerfeld, Balmain, Madonna and Beyoncé. The slogans will sell you love, success, beauty, quality and price. Everything you need to improve your lifestyle. Nothing revolutionary, but the formula works and builds desire and makes a customer sacrifice money. This principle is found in the slogans of many brands.

With Aubade, you will master “the art of love” and BaByliss will make you “more beautiful faster”. With Sephora, you “advance in beauty”, while Lacoste allows you to accomplish yourself by being yourself (“Become what you are”). La Halle aux vêtements allows you to be “really you”. Normally, it is at this moment of perfection and affirmation – since “you are worth it” thanks to L’Oréal – that you “scream with pleasure” (Zalando). Happiness is total! The packages offer the customer nothing more and nothing less than a lifestyle of pleasure.

At the end of September 2020, H&M had almost 32 million followers on the social network Instagram. At the beginning of 2021,

there were more than 36 million followers. The brand still communicates in the same way: on the collections, the brand's muses, with a large presence of visuals of anonymous people photographed during festivities in which the brand participates. There is an adaptation of the specificities of Instagram: there are more photographs than on other sites. Apart from that, the big brands choose to differentiate very little content on the different social networks. This is justified because their target audience is not present on all networks. There is no doubt about the desire for brand image homogeneity. The messages are clear, visual and replicated, to convince a maximum of customers to buy.

In Search of Happiness

Fashion industry insiders dictate their choices, the pace of trends and therefore drive sales. But trends are not born out of cultural factors, as we have seen, they are strategically – dare we say “artificially” – created to fit a production calendar based on fictitious seasons. They are “institutionalised”²⁹.

Human beings need clothes, that is obvious. But today, the number of pieces is a concern. According to Karl Marx (1818-1883), world trade is based almost entirely on the needs, not of consumption, but of production³⁰. Production is therefore necessary to earn money and to cover additional wants – rather than needs. But a “need” is a very relative idea. Fashion has always measured the value of clothing beyond the use to which it is put, and it is indeed its symbolic value which, reactivated regularly, allows the system to live. The fashionable item represents love, wealth and power, which explains why the customer's search is never satisfied: it is an empty belief, doomed to failure because it is impossible to fulfil. The emotional happiness sought is never found, because new needs remind us of the lack. Epicurus called this search for happiness “infinite”. This is the «paradox of materiality» described by Juliet Schor³¹. Acquisition is not enough to satisfy the search for happiness: it sustains and feeds it.

²⁹ Blaszczyk, Wubs, *The Fashion Forecasters*, cit.

³⁰ *Oxford Handbook of the History of Consumption*, ed. F. Trentmann, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York 2012, pp. 1-22.

³¹ J. Schor, *La véritable richesse. Une économie du temps retrouvé*, Éditions Charles Léopold Mayer, Paris 2010.

Fashion is a \$1.7 trillion industry in 2017. Capitalism, governments and institutions sometimes intervene to ensure that what is produced is also consumed. When Adbusters³² tried to buy airtime for its “Buy Nothing Day” campaign in 1997, it was refused by CBS because the message was contrary to the country’s economic policy at the time³³. In fact, state policies are involved in the sales process. For example, in the days following the September 11, 2001 attacks, President Bush reassured Americans that retail sales were still very strong – so all was well. In 2004, he also encouraged citizens to “shop more”. Human welfare is thus subordinated to the imperative of corporate wealth accumulation. Although fashion (still) has a lot to do with aesthetic creativity and pleasure, it is particularly subject to the demands of markets that control production. And this control also applies to bodies.

In particular, capitalism and purchasing, which define the new environment for people, have transformed the bodies. The shop, the mall and shopping have become leisure. Numerous festivals, Christmas, Easter, Thanksgiving, Mother’s Day, punctuate the year’s festivities.

Colonising: body transformation and buying practices

For the fashion industry, size zero helps buyers understand the garment and its future effect. The model’s body is a perfect coat rack. Placed in sexual unavailability, it is ageless, unattainable, plump and skinless. Karl Marx’s economic theories analyse capital/labour relations and, specifically, the physical condition of workers in Victorian England – their stunted waists, bent backs, gnarled fingers and deathly pale complexions. In working, the labourer «does not assert himself but denies himself, does not feel satisfied but unhappy, does not freely develop his physical and mental energy, but mortifies his body and ruins his mind»³⁴. The consumer’s body is transformed in several ways. On the one hand, his or her measurements are changed. Capitalism thus has a silhouette³⁵.

³² Adbusters is both a magazine and a foundation. The foundation hosts a network of activists, writers and artists who want to innovate new forms of activism for the information age of our time.

³³ Buy Nothing Day (BND) is a non-violent shopping boycott to protest against the wastefulness of consumer society. It was launched in 1992 by Canadian Ted Dave and has been taken up internationally by Adbusters.

³⁴ K. Marx, *Les manuscrits économique-philosophiques de 1844* (1932), Vrin, Paris 2007.

³⁵ K. Marx, *Le Capital*, vol. 1, Maurice Lachâtre, Paris 1872. See Millet, *Le livre noir de la mode*, cit., chap. 2.

Capitalism of bodies³⁶

Often, the corset is seen as a liberation. In reality, its disappearance created new standards. At the end of the 19th century, diets, which had existed since the ancient past, became part of everyday life. The bathroom scale made it possible to monitor one's weight. In short, the natural body did not seem beautiful enough to exist without help. The plastic surgery and cosmetics industries extend the possibilities of body modification. Nevertheless, the consumer is also changing in the shopping environment. Shopping is becoming a leisure activity that leads to the shopping centre every week. The act of shopping is represented by the hand of the consumer who accepts a sacrifice—spending money—to “improve” his or her body. The sacrifice is made at the checkout and the act of shopping is transformed into a transaction, an exchange of money for a bag containing a garment. The recurrence of regular purchases indicates a new perception and transformation of one's self. The habit of buying is clearly part of the consumer's occupation, leisure activities, journeys and gestures.

The world of fashion is severely lacking in diversity: the body has to disappear into a size zero to exist. Since the 1980s, men have also been caught up in this spiral, as shown by the rise of cosmetics, eating disorders and the size of male models. However, these pressures are incomparable to those faced by women. The models who are publicised on the catwalk have become models of beauty. Their influence goes beyond what should be worn. Women now find themselves in a cycle of shame and guilt when they do not fit the criteria and standards of this body capitalism. The \$2 trillion industry, whose images cover the globe, has a destructive effect on women, and first on the paid female models themselves.

The history of the human body is marked by many modifications³⁷. However, never before have attempts to modify the body been so widespread, nor has the ideal been so unattainable. The impossible version of beauty is a constant source of pressure for those who claim it. Large segments of the population, not just teenagers, fear comments about their appearance and develop bulimic or anorexic disorders; for example, 1% to 2% of the British population is affected. Globalisation has spread this desire for an idealised, slim, westernised body beyond the western world. Eating disorders follow the introduction of television in Fiji.

³⁶ See: S. Orbach, *Bodies*, Profile, London 2009.

³⁷ G. Vigarello, *Histoire de la beauté. Le corps et l'art d'embellir de la Renaissance à nos jours*, Seuil, Paris 2004.

As for the plastic surgeons in Tehran, each performs up to five rhinoplasties a day. A Western ideal is promoted at the expense of others: a thin nose, straight hair, no-slanted eyes, a slim waist and long legs. This is a new facet of colonialism. The iconography of the fashion brand has replaced religious iconography in setting aesthetic standards.

Since the 1980s, visual productions have taken over the world. Weekly in Europe, a person sees between 2,000 and 5,000 images of bodies. These relay the impossible beauty and promise the consumer of the democratisation of this ideal. Everyone can and should strive to be beautiful. All we have to do is pay constant attention. Dieting, exfoliating, filing, shining, softening, moisturising, dyeing, or applying make-up would make it possible to look like a commercial. Now at your fingertips, available on a smartphone, artificial intelligence rates your face on two key criteria, thinness and symmetry. The beauty industry uses the rhetoric of “choice”, empowerment and consumerism to give the impression that physical perfection is possible.

Gradually, tongues are loosened about the amelioration of beauty of advertisements, by plastic and cosmetic tricks, which are themselves digitally altered to create fake bodies. When H&M is blamed for digitally pigmenting models’ skins to give the impression of ethnic variety, it admits generating whole bodies by computer to follow industry standards. The counterfeit is perfect and it has its specialists. Recognised specialist in digital retouching, Pascal Dangin explains how he rectifies feet, knees, collarbones, temples, skins, bellies, hair and noses – including in an advertising campaign for the Dove brand called “Dove Real Beauty”. Reality has become horrible and must be made acceptable. It is smoothed out and homogenised, even in a campaign about “real beauty”³⁸.

Buy to survive

The well-known expression “The customer is king” obscures the fact that fashion is a compelling economic need. Maintaining a certain appearance is a necessity for the working people. One of the most enduring trends in the current economic crisis is that of workwear. As unemployment and job insecurity rise, clothing worn at work has become as influential as skills – or rather, it creates skills, looks good and is a sign of competitiveness.

³⁸ Hoskins, *Stitched Up*, cit., pp. 111-2. Unilever, owner of the Dove brand, has denied the extensive alterations to the campaign.

A letter from a female worker published in a newspaper in 1954 already stressed the importance of make-up: «You can't go hunting, even at a factory job, looking tired. Cosmetics brighten up a tired face and give the illusion of vigour and necessary youth»³⁹. In the same series of letters, another woman writes: «Personally, I would be greatly relieved if I could forego the trouble and expense of make-up, but capitalism won't let me. I am not a fool when I see advertisements for beauty products, but the economic pressure – I have to earn a living – forces me to buy and use the damned things»⁴⁰. Also in 1954, the radical philosopher Evelyn Reed (1905-1979) explained that criticising excessive consumption necessarily implies criticising capitalism. The freedom to wear fashionable clothes must be with the freedom not to. Without this critique, the statements of make-up stars such as Helena Rubinstein (1872-1965), who explains that «there are no ugly women, only lazy ones», take on the appearance of truth. Or how to exploit individual insecurities. Some people also say that clothes and cosmetics are a way to express individuality. But individuality has to be relatively stable. But in a world where advertising dictates changes in taste and behaviour, the individual is likely to be multiplied by a dynamic of dissociative identity disorders. Clothes have become the criteria of a system of evaluation of people. Style indicates the degree of interest in the human being. This “no style, no attention” approach shows that appearance is the barometer for the treatment of people. The discourse is based on discrimination, inequality and distinction. The current approach deeply disregards the swirl of crises between classes, races and genders.

In 1966, a journalist wrote: «The credit card has become a badge of belonging. It began as a zephyr. Now it is a strong wind. It may be the hurricane that blows our economy away»⁴¹. In 2012, credit card debt amounted to \$1 trillion in the us. And while credit has always existed, credit for everyday consumption has been on the rise since the 1980s. Consumers, encouraged buying, are taking on a lot of debt for systemic reasons. Low interest rates make it possible to buy more and more expensive products, even as real wages fall. Without debt, the economy would decline because the people would consume less. In France, it has been noted for several years that over-indebtedness is decreasing. This

³⁹ Ivi, p. 55.

⁴⁰ Ivi, p. 62.

⁴¹ Cited in J.A. Jarnow, M. Guerreiro, *Inside the Fashion Business. Text and Readings* (1965), Macmillan, New York 1990, p. 256.

can be explained by the safeguards put in place to protect consumers by making consumer credit more difficult to access. Over-indebtedness now concerns people whose financial difficulties are linked to their family situation or their job, and not – or less – to consumption⁴².

In the United States, fashion is still intrinsically linked to debt. It is commonplace to take out consumer credit – to buy during sales, for example. This is one of the phenomena to which credit companies are surfing. They manipulate the vocabulary to limit the impact of signing a loan: after all, a credit is a debt that does not bear the name “debt”. And at the checkout, the shop employee may offer you a card, different from the loyalty cards we know in France. It is a reserve of money, a credit, therefore a debt. According to Step Change, much of the debt of US consumers, especially singles, comes from fashion purchases. Annual interest rates on cards are often as high as 30%. Spreading payments is also facilitated. Late payments are charged and families often respond by signing up for consumer credit. The customer is trapped in a vicious circle of desire and purchase. He is not passive, of course. But they are fairly easy to convince⁴³.

Deregulated sales and consumption behaviour has turned buying into an act of survival. Fetishised, the product provides, at first, a dose of happiness. But, as artificial and ephemeral as it is, it quickly evaporates and gives way to loss. The scale of desire has become global and is measured by the yardstick of new clothes, all of which are replaceable, of wardrobes that are apparently as elastic as sales, and of seemingly unlimited needs. Everything has become useful. The incredible triumph of the fashion industry is matched only by the individual and collective unhappiness of not being able to own again. Consumerism is a field of research that draws on several challenging categories of analysis. Let us be sure that the increasingly rapid changes promise new bodily transformations⁴⁴.

All stages of the fashion industry are contaminated by the growth of production. The point is not to criticise the – welcome – democratisation of clothing. The mechanisation of industry has brought greater well-being to a wider range of people. However, this analysis reveals the excesses of this industry, based since the 17th century on the predation

⁴² J. Raynal, *Le surendettement diminue en France, mais touche les plus fragiles*, in “La Tribune”, 5 February 2019.

⁴³ Klarna, a Swedish organisation, already available in 17 countries, offers split payments in three instalments to online merchants who are its partners.

⁴⁴ E. Arnould, C.J. Thomson, *Consumer Culture Theory (CCT): Twenty Years of Research*, in “The Journal of Consumer Research”, xxxi, 2005, 4, pp. 868-82.

of human – and environmental – resources. Indeed, the positioning of “designers” today is based primarily on price, the absorption of competition, branding, the unification of taste, the speed of change and the dictatorship of celebrities. The fast fashion of the 1980s was to the clothing industry what thanatopraxy (the care of the dead) is a corpse: a cover-up. What is left of creation in these conditions? It certainly would have been appropriate to name this article *The Death of Creation*. However, the phenomenon is total and has changed the entire supply chain.

This industry uses and exploits the complexes and personal dissatisfaction of customers. Now, the natural is ugly. This has deregulated sales and consumption behaviour, which has turned buying into an act of survival. Fetishised, the product provides, at first, a dose of happiness. But, artificial and ephemeral, it quickly evaporates and gives way to lack. The scale of desire has become global and is measured by the yardstick of new clothes, all of which are replaceable, of wardrobes that are apparently as elastic as sales, and of seemingly unlimited needs. Sales techniques and the success of brands have thus blurred the line between so-called necessary goods and so-called ostentatious goods. Everything has become useful. The incredible triumph of the fashion industry is matched only by the individual and collective unhappiness of not being able to own again.

An extension of the body is found in the credit card held out at the cash register. A new member of the silhouette, it provides a new body envelope. Nevertheless, never satisfying, subject to change and ephemeral, this fictitious body is destined to evaporate until the next temptation. The measurements of the body have been considerably modified in favour of a certain homogenisation, but hidden behind an apparent originality. Capitalism has colonised the society⁴⁵. In this new environment, the bodies are changing durably. At the beginning of the 21st century, the body is like an occupied territory where each limb has become a slave to brands and to fashions.

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⁴⁵ F. Brune, *Le Bonheur conforme. Essai sur la normalisation publicitaire*, Gallimard, Paris 1981.