A Community of cultures

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Publication date
2016

Document Version
Accepted author manuscript

Published in
IFFTI conference proceedings Beijing 2016

Citation for published version (APA):

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A COMMUNITY OF CULTURES

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the concepts and social dynamics of fashion imitation and custom imitation as put forth by French sociologist Gabriel Tarde (1843-1904). Specifically his 1903 book The Laws of Imitation will be introduced and used to argue that, and examine how, fashion has, since the turn of the century, increasingly become a global custom rather than the exemplary innovative force Tarde associated with fashion. The second part of the paper therefore suggests turning to custom and tradition may be fruitful to revitalise the current state of fashion and can cause new fashions to come into being. The traditional technique used by the people of the Dutch village of Staphorst to decorate the fabrics for their traditional costumes - Staphorster stippling - which is nominated to be inscribed on UNESCO’s list of intangible cultural heritage, is presented as a case study in which it is shown how cultural traditions may unilaterally contribute to ethical, ecological and innovative fashion design. It is furthermore argued that the reciprocal effect of the dynamics between custom and fashion accounts for the preservation of traditional skills and techniques. The text concludes by examining the chances and opportunities as well as the pitfalls one may associate with the proposed dynamic interaction between fashion and tradition.

Key Words: Gabriel Tarde, fashion & tradition, Staphorster stippling, ethics

1. INTRODUCTION

After his 2013 ready-to-wear show in Paris, Japanese fashion designer Yohji Yamamoto declared he no longer wants to be regarded a fashion designer because he thinks the fashion market has become extremely disappointing since the turn of the century (Furniss 2013). During that same year at the Fall New York Fashion Week, online vintage retailer Byronesque launched a campaign and published an online declaration in which it claims that the fashion industry is to be held responsible for the excavation of the concept of fashion. Byronesque furthermore claimed fashion has become dominated by fakes and fast fashion, rather than revolving around imagination and inspiration. In 2015 Italian fashion journalist Angelo Flaccavento echoes the comments above in an article entitled: New York Fashion Weak. Flaccavento criticises the commercial character of the New York event; writes about the lack of surprising or innovative ideas; regards the many copies on the catwalks a sign of laziness; and emphasises the fact that shows are mainly “exercises in styling and little else” (Flaccavento 2015).

On the basis of the remarks above, one may acknowledge that the concept of fashion has suffered under the increasingly global, cheap, and rather unimaginative fast and mainstream fashions that are characterised by superficial and successive changes, rather than creative surprises and experiment. In this paper I therefore suggest examining fashion’s current forces and dynamics; its power of innovation,

experiment and creativity; and its future potential. In order to arrive at a fresh perspective upon fashion, an elaboration upon the concepts of ‘fashion imitation’ and ‘custom or tradition imitation’ as put forth by French sociologist and philosopher Gabriel Tarde (1843 – 1904) will be used as a theoretical framework. Consequently the interplay and dynamics of Tarde’s two concepts of imitation will be discussed and their several stages and constellations will be clarified. The craft of Staphorster Stippling, which is a decorative technique for the fabrics of the traditional dress of the Dutch village of Staphorst, will be used as a case study. The stippling technique has been placed on the Dutch inventory list for intangible cultural heritage for UNESCO, and may serve to elucidate the potential of traditions and custom as a motor of change within four different areas being: the preservation of skills and techniques, cultural revival, ethical and ecological production and consumption, and new expressions in fashion. After having discussed these four areas of future potential, the paper concludes by briefly comparing the chances traditions provide with the pitfalls one must also take into account. More specifically the question of possession and the dangers of commercial approbation will be exemplified and assigned as important areas of future studies and analysis.

2. TRADITION, CUSTOM AND FASHION IMITATION

In his *Laws of Imitation* (1903) Gabriel Tarde introduces the concept of fashion imitation and distinguishes it from the concept of tradition or custom imitation. The latter is characterised for its conservative and consolidating form of imitation: although changes do occur, they are small and do not fundamentally alter traditions and customs in place. Custom imitation, furthermore, takes place on a local scale and is relatively stable. Uniforms, religious or otherwise ritual attire, such as the wedding dress, and national or traditional costumes can be regarded as complying with the characteristics of custom imitation. And although Elizabeth Wilson’s idea that “even uniforms are subject to fashion” may still stand (2003 [1985]: 36), it is important to acknowledge that Tarde uses the term ‘fashion’ differently is his writing. Whereas Wilson equates fashion with changes in dress (3), Tarde’s distinction between fashion and custom imitation revolves around deciding whether changes are innovative, extra-national or even global, which he names fashion imitation, or whether they are consolidated into existing customs and traditions, and hence effectively change very little.²

Before comparing Tarde’s definitions of imitation to the situation we find ourselves in today, it is worthwhile to briefly examine the dynamics Tarde ties to the interplay between the innovative forces he relates to fashion and the conservative forces of custom imitation. Although Tarde, like contemporary sociologists Georg Simmel and Thorstein Veblen, regards the process of fashion imitation as initially descending from the higher classes to the lower ones in society (1903: 368), he also moves beyond such a top-down perspective when he writes that due to “the gradual suppression of caste, class, and nationality barriers and […] the lessening of distances through more rapid means of locomotion, as well as through greater density of

² Tarde, much like French philosopher Gilles Lipovetsky in *The Empire of Fashion. Dressing Modern Democracy* (1994 [1987]), does not limit the concept of fashion to dress alone. He rather regards it an innovative force apparent within society as a whole.
population” a “fusion of all classes into one” will occur (1903: 368-370). Apart from foreseeing a classless future society, Tarde, who generally regards communities to move from custom to fashion, from tradition to innovation, also takes an opposite movement into account. He writes that “after having passed from custom to fashion, communities can go back from fashion to custom – to custom that has broadened, out, to be sure, never to that which has been narrowed in” (1903: 380).

Tarde’s dynamic concepts hence describe the way communities may make the transition from custom to fashion without disqualifying the fact that the opposite effect is also a possibility. One may ask whether custom and fashion imitation may be useful concepts to analyse today’s state of fashion. Before doing so, however, briefly exploring the phases that can be detected since the beginning of the twentieth century till now, will help to develop a clear picture that indicates which conditions and influences may have played a part in the situation we find fashion in today. At the beginning of the twentieth century, around the time Tarde’s book was translated and published in English (1903), class structures were still in effect, at least to the extent that they would influence who could and who could not afford to follow fashion in dress. In other words, one could at the time observe the lower classes imitating the fashion of the higher classes that would consequently turn to new fashions in order to distinguish themselves from the lower classes. Custom imitation was all there was for and between those without the means to change styles of dress for other than practical reasons. A woollen overcoat was often worn for the coarse of a lifetime, clothes were mended or altered to fit smaller family members, and certainly not discarded because they were to be regarded out of fashion. However, much of this changed when mass production of clothing was introduced after World War II, and fashionable dress became something most people, whether wealthy or not, could purchase.

Even though cultural critics Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno argued that mass produced commodities would result in passive consumers who are content to settle for the reproduction of sameness before the end of World War II (2002 [1944]: 106), in relation to fashion their prophecy did not come into being until what one could name the ‘second wave’ in the mass production of fashionable dress occurred.3 Since the turn of the century, the influence of fast and mainstream fashion has increased dramatically. Whereas the change of collections has sped up from the traditional two to as many as twenty per year, diversity lags behind and can be characterised by successive rather than innovative changes. Apart from most probably being the cause of Yamamoto’s exclamation that fashion has become ‘shit’ during the past fifteen years (Furniss 2013), one may also remark that fast fashion may also be characterised by its copying of catwalk designs, rather than employing designers to come up with their own creative designs and additions to the idea what fashion may be.4 A next step is to realise that it is through imitation that looking fashionable has become even more widespread and within reach than it was during the mass production of fashion in the 1950s. What is more, the difference between mass fashion of the 1950s and that of the post-2000 fast fashion is the fact that the items are

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3 The ‘first wave’ of mass production occurred during the 1950s and I here argue it remained innovative to some extent due to the innovations new materials such as polyamides and nylon brought about, or within the field of expression, in which that of the early 1970s punk movement is exemplary. As such, Horkheimer and Adorno were ahead of their times and their description suits the 2000s much better when it comes to thinking about fashion.

not only produced on a much larger and global scale, their designs are direct imitations of the items shown during fashion weeks.

If one now turns to Tarde’s distinction between fashion and custom imitation, and takes into account that fashion imitation is innovative and global, whereas custom imitation is conservative and local, one may notice that although the local-global distinction may still be in effect, the innovative aspect of fast fashion’s imitation is hardly to be found. Fashion’s current imitation, in other words, has very little to do with innovation and all the more with direct – and hence in a sense fashion-local – imitation. That is to say, one could argue that there is little to no innovation but merely a repetition of successive changes that do not truly challenge or alter our ideas about what fashion may be, do or express. To put it differently and in the words of online retailer Byronesque: “Fashion has become so driven by mass consumerism that everyone looks the same and it’s hard to be inspired anymore”.

Think about Normcore, a cynical comment upon society in its origin, yet also a poignant example of what people wear on a day-to-day basis: there seems to be so much imitation, semblance and expressionless dress that it may be safe to say that what we currently call ‘fashion’ actually resembles Tarde’s concept of custom imitation more than anything else. Even though it is global, rather than the locality Tarde associated with conservatism and consolidation (1903: 268), fashion currently noticeably lacks innovation, is rather conservative, and our times may be characterised by what one can call ‘custom imitation in fashion’. It may be what Tarde would name ‘a broadened custom’, since it lacks the most important characteristic Tarde tied to fashion: that of true change (1903: 380).

3. A STIPPLING TRADITION AND NEW FASHION EXPRESSIONS

As described in the former section, the ways mainstream and fast fashions currently operate causes them to introduce successive changes of what essentially remains the same. No remarkable changes are introduced and little to no creative innovations can be noticed. Fashion imitation has become custom imitation. In search for new impulses for fashion why not turn to tradition for inspiration? This was exactly what Spanish-Colombian designer Ricardo Ramos thought when he turned to the traditional garments of the people of the Dutch village of Staphorst for his Fall/Winter 2011 collection, entitled Reconstructing Klederdracht [traditional dress], which he presented during the Berlin Fashion Week of the same year.

A typical feature of the Staphorst traditional dress consists of the colourful dots of paint with which the fabrics are decorated. The tradition originates from 1905 when Frans Vloedgraven, owner of a textile shop in Staphorst started selling the fabric (Bakels 2015: 39). The fabric was a success and became a prominent feature of the traditional garments of Staphorst (Ibid.). In addition, the people of Staphorst started to create their own stamps by placing nails and pins into pieces of wood or cork and a tradition was born (see Figure 1).

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After World War II, however, the number of people wearing Staphorst’s traditional garments declined rapidly. And although one could still find some young people dressed in traditional garments in the 1990’s, today it is hard to find women under the age of fifty doing so (Oosten et al. 2012: 9). It is therefore more than likely that the traditional wear of Staphorst will eventually follow the fate of many of the other traditional garments in the Netherlands, and will disappear into museums, closets or attics to never be seen worn out on the streets again apart from at times of commemorative festivities.

Aware of the disappearance of traditions and therewith crafts and skills that accompany these, the people of Staphorst came into action (Oosten 2012: 9). Only a few months after Ramos’ 2011 Berlin show a fashion show had been planned to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the village of Staphorst. The villagers had, unknowingly, taken on a similar stance towards their traditional fabrics and had asked the people of Staphorst to come up with their own contemporary designs based upon the traditional stippled fabrics (Oosten et al. 2012: 8). Former painter and inhabitant of Staphorst, Gerard van Oosten was one of the participants and continues to keep the tradition alive in Staphorst and beyond. Apart from compiling a book in which van Oosten combined images of traditional wear, Ramos’ 2011 collection and the contemporary designs created by the people of Staphorst, he actively promotes the preservation and continuation of the skills and techniques of creating stamps and paints needed by giving workshops in which the old technique is used to decorate modern clothing (see Figure 2).
As indicated above, the preservation of skills and techniques is one of at least four opportunities that arise from the revival of tradition for fashion. Apart from preservation, one may also notice a cultural revival of the decorative technique itself. No longer limited to traditional wear, but fashionable items of clothing are decorated with the colourful dots, which have been extended from tradition into fashion. This is a dynamic and a direction Gabriel Tarde has not described, nor taken into account. It entails a force from what is local, handcrafted, and susceptible to little change that influences and initiates innovation that may expand globally. The pair of shoes presented below, for instance, would most probably have not come into being without van Oosten’s enthusiasm and energy towards preserving the technique and the potential he saw alongside (see Figure 3).

A third aspect that can be related to the revival of Staphorster Stippling has an ethical and ecological character. Rather than cheaply buying mass-manufactured items of clothing, the participants in van Oosten’s workshops; those that purchase the paints he has developed to decorate their own fabrics or items; or fashion design students are likely to value the fabric and items much more. Investing time and dedication towards the creation of stippled fabrics, for instance, entails building up a different relationship with what we wear; a relationship that will most probably last much longer and reach much deeper than that of the average item on sale in a high street. Placing such values above those of cheap novelties inevitably lead to less waste, more conscious production and consumption of fashionable items. And lastly the revival of the Staphorster Stippling can be said to have introduced new expressions in and for fashion. As the fashionable pair of high-heeled shoes, the pair of underwear, and Ramos’ collection show: the decorative tradition has succeeded to provide fashion with new powers of expression, and as such we have moved from tradition to fashion.
4. CRITICAL AND CONCLUDING REMARKS: POSSESSION AND APPROBATION

In 2013 Staphorster Stippling made it onto UNESCO’s preliminary list of intangible cultural heritage. The placement on the list does not only entail a preservation of the traditional techniques, one of the additional criteria is that the heritage is passed on to younger generations (Bakels et al. 2015: 39). In other words, apart from safeguarding the technique, UNESCO, also demands that the cultural heritage is broadened, innovated and as such transformed into modern practices. Whereas the example of Staphorster Stippling being adopted by Ricardo Ramos and Gerard van Oosten’s workshops are solid examples of such transformations, scholar P.J. Margry has pointed out the paradox that these demands bring about. The latter posits two points that may be labelled as paradoxical since they undermine certain aspects that can be said to be essential for the preservation of the heritage. The first one entails the question of possession, the second one that of commercialism. In this concluding section both will be discussed and related to the dynamic move from tradition to new fashion expressions, ethical consumption, preservation of skills and techniques and, perhaps most importantly, to cultural revival.

The question of who possesses certain techniques is a complicated one, which also emphasises the essential intangible character of the heritage in question here. Do the ladies that still wear the original fabrics own the technique? Does it belong to the people of Staphorst in general? Is there a problem with fashion designers such as Ramos, people participating in workshops and van Oosten’s underwear deploying the technique that is originally associated with a tradition that is more than a century old? Briefly moving beyond Staphorst is perhaps the most effective way of discussing how complicated matters are. In November 2015 the Inuit Nunavut family discovered that fashion designer Kokon to Zai, who designs for upmarket Europe, had copied one of their sacred designs. The original parka belonged to a shaman named Ava who designed and made it to protect him against drowning, hence the hands on the chest. Figure 4, presented below, allows one to compare the sacred Inuit design (left) and the commercial fashion design (right). It does seem that Salome Ava, great-granddaughter of the shaman was right when she exclaimed the following words: “This is a stolen piece. There is no way that this fashion designer could have thought of this exact duplicate by himself”.

Figure 4. (Kieran Oudshoorn/CBC (from book Northern Voices) /Tristan Fewings/Getty Images)

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7 Ibid. (see previous note).
The example above illustrates the ways in which ownership is tied to both tradition and meaning as well as to commercialism. For the Inuit the decoration of the parka is possession of their shaman and sacred since it was designed to protect him. Fashion designer Kokon to Zai, however, has appropriated the design for his collection; the jumper featured above was to be sold for $925 CDN.\(^8\) Whereas the Inuit value the sacredness of their ancestor and his history, it is safe to say Zai’s motivations for using the design have a more commercial character. As such the question of possession must be tied to that of commercialisation.

If one now returns to the Staphorst Stippling and the question of ownership similar paradoxes arise. The women that still dress in Staphorst’s traditional costume on a daily basis must also be associated with a traditional style of living. Severe religious, modest and morally conscious as they are, it is easily seen that they would most probably be as shocked, if not insulted, at seeing ‘their’ technique used on promiscuous high heels and underwear used as the Inuit were in the example above. In addition and as Margry also points out, the popularisation of the tradition may also function as a magnet for tourists that are drawn from the fashion back to the original Staphorst costume and therewith potentially turning Staphorst and its inhabitants into a circus lacking all privacy to shape one’s life freely, whether according to tradition or the latest fashion.

One may therefore conclude that, as argued in this paper aided by Tarde’s concepts of traditional and fashion, traditional crafts and techniques can contribute to ethical cultural revivals that bring new expressional qualities for fashion. In order to prevent a clash of traditional and fashion cultures, in which traditional symbolism is monetised and hence ‘stolen’, a distinction between craft, technique and skills on the one hand, and signification on the other, needs to be made. Whilst craft, techniques and skills are preserved, fashion is offered surprising traditions as a way out of the unimaginative commercial fakes and fast fashion this paper opened with. As such the culture of tradition and that of fashion do not need to clash but may operate as a community in which cultures are respected and crossovers celebrated.

REFERENCES


