

It's just one thing after another...

—KEL GLAISTER

*Fashion belongs under the heading of vanity for its intent is of no inner value; and also... folly, for it is folly to be compelled by mere example into following slavishly the conduct shown us by many in society.*¹

In Brad Haylock's work *Everything you never wanted to know about fashion*, daily-rotating light-box wisdom satirises our sartorial, ideological and philosophical fashions. And, ultimately, our interest in fashion itself. Oh, so meta.

In the subway of the Flinders Street train station, installed for the enlightenment of passersby, this text work announces with cool authority what is 'in' today (literally) and what is now *passé*, in a hyper-speed caricature of fashion and its (our) inexplicable obsessions.

What is this thing we call 'fashion'? One could say that the process of being fashionable involves somehow becoming the very best at being typical of whatever group you find yourself in at the time. Or, fashion 'is a societal formation always combining two opposite principles. It is a socially acceptable and secure way to distinguish oneself from others and, at the same time, it satisfies the individual's need for social adaptation and imitation!'² It's a tricky procedure of being innovative (to make sure you're better than everyone else) but not too much (to make sure nobody thinks you're weird.)

Here, Haylock's work uses the framework of fashions relating to clothes and appearance, and its accompanying consumerist programme expressed through trite *fash-mag* ad-speak, to address other fashions in our lives: in theory, practice and behaviour. And so shall I.

Where have I heard that before?

The formula used in each statement of *Everything...* has been dubbed a 'snowclone'.³ This can be defined as a 'type of cliché which uses an old idiom formulaically in a new context'.⁴ Or, the saviour of uninspired journalists everywhere. You know, 'Have X, Will Travel', or 'To X or not to X?'

Haylock's work uses the fashion snowclone par excellence; the classic 'X is the new black'. A simple Google search will let you know that everything from hybrid cars to anal sex is the new black (referencing a Google search being to the lazy essay writer what the snowclone is to the lazy journalist). But here it is pushed to absurdity, switched so fast even the most cashed-up and switched-on couldn't possibly keep up.

The hackneyed, machine-gun style rhetoric of fashion magazines is aped in

the text and format of *Everything*.... This jams together the worlds of fashion and language, which are arguably very different beasts: 'In contradistinction to language, which *aims* at communication, fashion *plays* at it, turning it into the goal-less stake of a signification without a message'.⁵ *Everything*... plays up and plays with the strange relationship that fashion has with meaning. This is a relationship that isn't too stable; where fashion skips away from meaning, or screws it up entirely.

Cycles (or: *When I was a new raver, I spake as a new raver...*)

Obsession with what is the 'new' new points to one defining feature of Fashion. It changes. Fast. This could be because 'the continuous process of change which we call fashion is not handicapped by any compulsion to make progress. In a real sense, fashion is evolution without destination'.⁶

But then again, it could have to do with the weird things that Fashion does with time, both in the constant recycling of looks and moods, and in the instant gratification-based system where evolution is a bit naff. Today is the new tomorrow. And you don't have to worry about yesterday, 'cos that will happen next week. Fashion's 'proper *actuality* (its up-to-dateness, its relevance) is not a reference to the present, but an immediate and total recycling'.⁷

So each trend must emerge with the authority of timelessness and perhaps even of logic, while simultaneously doomed to a pitifully short half-life of popularity. And so, every now and then, we look back and think how naïve it was to wear X trend or believe in Y outmoded ideology. How stupid. But you were into it, you were there; I saw you. The thing is, while we all admit our past mistakes in following various fashions, there seems to be no impulse to learn from them. We're right at the front of the queue for the next one.

In other words, it's always now, because 'Fashion's aggressiveness, whose rhythm can even be one of vendettas, ends up being undone by a more pertinent image of time; by that absolute, dogmatic, vengeful present tense in which Fashion speaks'.⁸

If you see the teeth of the hipster, think not the hipster is smiling at you...

If Fashion is vengeful, then what happens if we ignore it? As Haylock's competitive typeface and advertising glare bark orders at us, we should take a moment to think of the consequences of conscientious objection, because a 'knowledge of Fashion never comes without a price; it holds sanction for those who are excluded from it: the stigma of being *unfashionable*'.⁹

Of course, here we bang heads against the question of intention. Not everyone wants to be fashionable, many are actively opposed to the idea. But

one of the more infuriating tendencies of fashion (for all those aiming for sub-cultural chic), but one that demonstrates its superevolutionary resilience, is the neat trick of absorbing all that could otherwise pose a threat.

Off-cited examples range from mainstream adoption of punk aesthetics, to the use and abuse of philosophical/theoretical catchphrases like 'deconstruction' or 'simulacra,' to the current embrace of the keffiyeh by hipsters everywhere. Revolution is the new order. This process allows component parts of a political or ideological position, expressed sartorially or otherwise, to be stripped of meaning; reduced to combinations of *vestemes* with no inherent significance themselves, but whose earlier attributed meanings are doomed to be irrelevant anyway, to be toyed with and tossed aside. For better or for worse.¹¹

So, Fashion will eat all your ideas, repeat itself incessantly, fuck with language and bitch about you behind your back. But you can't get away from it, even if you try. It's everywhere.

And after all, after Kant, 'it is better to be a fool within fashion than out of it!'¹²

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Notes

- 1 Kant, I., In *Analytic of the Beautiful* from *The Critique of Judgement*. Quoted from S. Miller, 'Fashion as Art; Is Fashion Art?', *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body and Culture*, vol. 11, no.1, March 2007, p 32
- 2 Gronow, J., *Taste and Fashion: The Social Function of Fashion and Style*, *Acta Sociologica*, vol. 36, no. 2, 1993, p 89
- 3 By Glen Whitman, see <http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/language/og/archives/000350.html>
- 4 <http://www.allwords.com/word-snowclone.html>
- 5 Baudrillard, J., 'Fashion, or the enchanting spectacle of the code', in *Fashion Theory, A Reader* (Barnard, M., ed.), Routledge, London and New York, 2007, p 468
- 6 Brooks Young, A., 'Fashion has its laws', in *Fashion Theory, A Reader* (Barnard, M., ed.), Routledge, London and New York, 2007, p 49
- 7 Baudrillard, J., p 463
- 8 Barthes, R., 'Showing How Rhetoric Works', in *The Language of Fashion*, Power Publications, Sydney, 2006, p 116
- 9 *Ibid*, pp 114–115
- 10 Barthes' neologism 'vesteme' names the basic unit of signification within the fashion system. See: Barthes, R., 'Blue is in Fashion This Year, A Note on Research into Signifying Units in Fashion Clothing', in *The Language of Fashion*, Power Publications, Sydney, 2006, p 49
- 11 Kant, I., quoted from S. Miller, p 32