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Accumulation and Avant-Garde Apparel

In his essay, “A Marginal System: Collecting,” French sociologist Jean Baudrillard writes: “Let us grant that our everyday objects are in fact objects of a passion – the passion for private property, emotional investment in which is every bit as intense as investment in the ‘human’ passions... they become mental precincts over which I hold sway, they become things of which I am the meaning, they become my property and my passion” (Baudrillard 259). A leading theorist on the discussion of consumerism, Baudrillard uses a semiotic analysis to explore the materialistic nature of contemporary culture and the integral role of object ownership in the lives of human beings. Accumulating items offers purpose and can contribute to an individual’s security as a person. This can be tied to the fashion industry, with a focus on clothing and dress. Fashion has been long understood to have a sociological function as “a social process of mutual adaptation” wherein “actors are free to decide if and to what extent they will adopt a new object, practice, or representation” (Aspers and Godart 185). The meaning behind choices of apparel influences the consumption of this aspect of culture, as Roland Barthes (a contemporary of Baudrillard who was at the forefront of semiotics) suggests “there is a ‘lexicon and syntax’ in clothing that resembles the structure of language” (Aspers and Godart 183). The desire to speak through the items one wears only heightens the urge to collect particular objects which would open those lines of communication. This is especially true in the realm of current high fashion – “expensive, fashionable clothes produced by leading fashion houses” which are not to be confused with the cheaply constructed, mass-produced items of the fast fashion world (“High Fashion, noun”). To make this connection more apparent, Baudrillard himself has even inspired a line of clothing. An early season of a Japanese streetwear brand, Cav Empt (derived

from the Latin phrase *caveat emptor*, which roughly translates to “buyer beware”), “made extensive use of quotes from postmodern philosophers, particularly Jean Baudrillard, the quotations acting as a statement on the nature of the garment itself and the cultural baggage attached to it” (Contributor). Coveting objects from the high fashion industry is a contemporary phenomenon which demonstrates Baudrillard’s theories on collecting and consumerism as well as related schools of thought.

In order to best understand the relationship between Baudrillard and the status of elevated style in society, the framework of his arguments must first be outlined. “A Marginal System: Collecting” is a chapter from Baudrillard’s book *Le Système des objets*, published in 1968, which expanded upon his doctorate thesis through “a semiotic analysis of the status of the object in contemporary culture” that has been shaped by “consumerism and the media” (Harris). Baudrillard proposes that individuals are seduced by commodities and “distinguish themselves and attain social prestige and standing through the purchase and use of consumer goods,” with the system of objects actually operating as a system of signs within society, because objects are “displayed for the sign value as much as their use value” (Kellner 313-314). Regarding the assessment of value, Baudrillard emphasizes the distinction between the use-value and exchange-value attributed to objects, with use-value based on a person’s objective needs and exchange-value based on the subjective, cultural significance the sign is imbued with (Borchers 297-298). The prioritization of exchange-value is a possible explanation for the increasing gravitation towards branding over functionality while purchasing new items, including garments. Within the discourse which governs this signifying system, the “*objet*” is “anything which is the cause or subject of a passion; figuratively – and par excellence – the loved object” (Baudrillard 259). The absence of a specific object (the incompleteness of a collection) can be a glaring reminder of what

the collector does not have, leading to the intense fixation on this gap or a form of jealousy equivalent to the Freudian concept of castration (Baudrillard 264, 268). When the collector does acquire the desired objects, the passion of collecting structures their life – the habituation and organization of collecting replaces time, and possession dispels the anxiety of death through the promise of perpetuation via inanimate items (Baudrillard 267-268). Consumeristic attitudes essentially dictate the perceptions, practices, and possibilities of personhood. Baudrillard would posit that this stems from the era of simulation which characterizes the present day. With the ushering of postmodernity came the uprising of hyperreality. Umberto Eco defines hyperreality as a time wherein “the ‘completely real’ becomes identified with the ‘completely fake.’ Absolute unreality is offered as real presence,” persuading an audience to accept it as truth either because they cannot locate the falsehood or because they are satisfied with a fabrication (Eco 7, 19). As explained by Best and Kellner:

The hyperreal for Baudrillard is a condition whereby models replace the real, as exemplified in such phenomena as the ideal home in women’s or lifestyle magazines, ideal sex as portrayed in sex manuals or relationship books, ideal computer skills as set forth in computer manuals, and so on. In these cases, the model becomes a determinant of the real, and the boundary between hyperreality and everyday life is erased. (119-120)

The exchange-value of objects takes precedent over their use-value, drawing people in with the allure of possession as a means of constructing a more pleasurable reality. Thus, worldviews and relationships begin to revolve around commodities, and the fixation on collection as well as the centrality of the object in the creation of meaning is enabled.

Clothing items and accessories are complex objects with an intrinsically social dimension. Along with the exchange-value granted to various brands and styles, fashion has its own linguistic features and systems. Barthes – whose work is incorporated into the foundations of Baudrillard’s criticisms – has researched the topic extensively over the decades. He considers

clothing to be an “object of appearance” with underlying socio-psychological motivations (*The Language of Fashion* 20, 24). In *The Fashion System*, Barthes identifies the vestimentary codes and structures which, although challenging, must be recognized in order to read fashion texts (different types of dress, choices in patterns, and so forth) (36-39). He also explicates that defining fashion as a sign is not a simple task due to the arbitrariness of its syntactic nature which can be expected to change on a yearly basis (*The Fashion System* 214-215). The slipperiness of fashion utterances and their fragmented grounding in culture means that the sign veers on the edge of alienation and the imaginary, existing in something of an “unreality” or “utopian reality” as “the real world does not actually consist of any vestimentary lexicon, though its elements – here world and there clothing – may really be given” (*The Fashion System* 284). In an interview on the subject, when asked about his analysis, Barthes suggests that “the arbitrary nature of fashion is sidestepped, hidden beneath the rationalized, naturalist lexicon. Fashion is lying. It is hiding behind social and psychological alibis” (*The Language of Fashion* 95). He uses the publication of Stéphane Mallarmé’s *La Dernière Mode* to explain that real exercises in the critical exploration of fashion as a sign system can reveal “an emptiness which is not absurd, a nothingness which is constructed as a meaning” (*The Language of Fashion* 95). Thanks to this extensive semiotic analysis, it is clear that the language of fashion is not only embedded with cultural myths that shape its values (which will ultimately impact the collection process), it is a model for hyperreality.

The production of fashion and fashion objects is systematic, a “persistent network of beliefs, customs and formal procedures which together form an articulated social organization with an acknowledged central purpose” (Kawamura 65). This purpose is twofold. First, fashion – arguably, haute couture in particular – is an expression of creativity. As per Barthes’ research,

this is communicated to viewers through visual-linguistic interpretations. Postmodernism encouraged the reconsideration of fashion as not only a technology, but as an industry with aesthetic properties worthy of investigation (Kim 2, 6). If evaluating fashion as a form of art: “Especially in the postmodern era, high-level interpretation based on the cultural function of the artworks becomes more important since artworks are valued as cultural agents of social, political, and ideological change” (Kim 73). An exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art showcased designers such as Fortuny, Saint Laurent, Adrian, and Courages who pulled from classical styles to “crisscross the boundaries of art and design, merging past, present, and future, and blending myth and reality” through the apparel they conceived (Kim 97-98). Throughout *Travels in Hyperreality*, Eco recognizes museums as a prime location for the employment of hyperreality and the clothing items on display appear to perpetuate the same, resulting in a curiously fantastic environment. Furthermore, in *The Transparency of Evil*, Baudrillard puts forth the following commentary about the commercialization of art:

In the postmodern media and consumer society, everything becomes an image, a sign, a spectacle, a transaesthetic object — just as everything also becomes trans-economic, trans-political, and trans-sexual. This “materialization of aesthetics” is accompanied by a desperate attempt to simulate art, to replicate and mix previous artistic forms and styles, and to produce ever more images and artistic objects. But this “dizzying eclecticism” of forms and pleasures produces a situation in which art is no longer art in classical or modernist senses but is merely image, artifact, object, simulation, or commodity (Baudrillard is aware of increasingly exorbitant prices for art works, but takes this as evidence that art has become something else in the orbital hyperspace of value, an ecstasy of skyrocketing values in “a kind of space opera” [p. 19]). (*Stanford Encyclopedia*)

Yes, articles produced in the high fashion industry may be the objects of artistic merit, but they are still objects and are therefore caught in the system of collecting as well as the reductive social fixation on ownership nonetheless.

Another purpose of fashion is to denote the placement of the wearer (or collector) in the social hierarchy. Throughout history, costumes have been indicators of wealth and class. Barthes

took an interest in mapping the evolution of fashion modes, as he claims there are large gaps in the knowledge surrounding histories of dress which typically only considered the outfits owned by royalty and aristocrats – “not only is social class reduced here to an ‘image’ (the lord, the lady, etc.), it is deprived of its ideological content” (*The Language of Fashion* 5). In more recent times, fashion continues to mark distinctions between social classes:

Clothing styles function as one of the less obvious aspects of cultural capital, as the manner in which we dress and look after our appearances is often deeply ingrained into our dispositions. Hence, within today’s divergent sets of self-fashioning practices consumerist choices continue to be representative of the cultural background that one comes from and the trajectory that unfolds as a result. (Rafferty 245)

Although not always intended, the garments one can manage to purchase is reflective of their class group and others will often assess them accordingly. Individuals are encouraged to establish an identity through the brand-name items that they dress themselves in. Customers consequently become emotionally invested in their consumption of these objects, to the point where some shopping habits can be considered “obsessive and irrational” (Rafferty 257). This could translate into waiting outside a store overnight in order to buy the latest designer piece, or spending an exorbitant amount on a particular coat for the sake of the label attached to it wherein reality the disposable income required to do so is not within the budget of that consumer. It is common knowledge that amassing wealth allows the affordance of luxury items whereas members of the lower class must spend these finances on basic necessities. It would follow that the results of Rafferty’s study may bear even greater significance if exclusively applied to the high fashion industry, where steep price tags and the promise of clout would presumably exaggerate stratification. Conversely, wearing apparel which is indicative of a higher social class might be an appealing and debatably attainable method of symbolically transgressing those barriers. To Baudrillard, this trend is can be explained by understanding that “the entire society is

organized around consumption and display of commodities through which individuals gain prestige, identity, and standing. In this system, the more prestigious one's commodities (houses, cars, clothes, and so on), the higher one's standing in the realm of sign value" (*Stanford Encyclopedia*). Because objects of appearance correlate to the impression of social status, collectors are motivated to accumulate clothing which they feel reflects their desired standing.

It is integral to comprehend that this combination of aesthetic worth and class communicability forms the basis for the subjective cultural value assigned to the signifying system of fashion. The rhetoric of these objects drives vestimentary collection and consumption. Take, for example, a legendary fashion brand, Maison Martin Margiela. Founded in Paris in 1989, Martin Margiela led a provocative design house with intriguingly experimental and deconstructive techniques. In opposition of mass media culture, Margiela preferred to create in anonymity, which he continued after leaving the brand in 2009 by appointing a "faceless" team to take his place (Leaper). He took a unique approach to labelling his clothing lines, described as follows:

Margiela launched his first menswear collection in 1998, known as line 10. Every new product range is given a number from 0 to 23, acting as a referencing code rather than a chronological order. The original tags were blank white labels, hand tacked with four white stitches that could be seen from the outside of the garment - a symbol of cool for those in-the-know. The ranges have expanded to include fine jewellery (12), footwear (22), eyewear (8), objects (13) and fragrance (3). (Leaper)

These labels quickly became iconic. Over time, avid supporters of the brand would even have replicas tattooed onto their bodies, a trend also adopted by supporters of Rick Owens, another noteworthy designer (see Appendix). Margiela's cult-like following and the unwavering dedication of their admirers has widely been acknowledged by the fashion industry, as the cultivation of elitism and discretion was entirely purposeful. As written in a testimony to the brand's inspiration and mystique:

His store, an unmarked space in Paris, its interior masked totally in white, defied the rules of retail and commerce. Everyone in his atelier, down to the designer himself, dressed anonymously in white lab coats. In some of his look books and presentations, models wore black tape over their eyes, their identities obscured (a concept that would be turned into sunglasses, allowing even the consumer to adopt a Margiela mask of their own). As much as all this rendered him invisible it made his house stand out as anti-fashion, a burgeoning aesthetic manifested in everything from Marc Jacobs's grunge collection for Perry Ellis to Miuccia Prada's nylon handbags to Helmut Lang's hypermodern streetwear. (Lewis)

The cult of Margiela, with all of its influence and grandeur, captivates customers through an exclusive, fabricated identity (an identity of non-identity, ironically), in which they are invited to participate in some small part so long as they own their items of clothing. Today, the name "Margiela" not only carries the weight of avant-garde approval but also of excitement in popular culture – incorporated into the lyrics of recording artists such as Jay-Z, Young Thug, and so forth (Jay-Z; Young Thug). In 2013, Maison Martin Margiela designed the *Yeezus* tour wardrobe for Kanye West, which included a version of the label's signature mask, a crystal veil that appears in every couture show, and delighted both music and fashion fans alike (Alexander). Now, not only does wearing Margiela communicate elevated taste and knowledge of fashion, it likens consumers to their favourite hip-hop performer. The artistic recognition and potential of boosting social status make the prospect of owning Margiela-manufactured objects incredibly enticing for collectors.

Furthermore, Maison Martin Margiela is not the only luxury fashion brand to stimulate a cultural craze like this. Designers such as Ann Demeulemeester and Dries Van Noten take inspiration from Japanese deconstructionist trends in order to "destroy the normative clothing conventions found in the Western clothing system" (Kawamura 54). Japanese designers themselves, such as Issey Miyake, Yohji Yamamoto, and Rei Kawakubo of Comme des Garçons are disrupting hegemonic French high fashion standards and enthraling the public with their

“exoticism” (Kawamura 138-139). Their work is highly desirable for collectors who are interested in the postmodern era of fashion. Yet, paradoxically, this anti-establishment strain of innovation actually lends itself suitably to the capitalist and consumer-driven establishment of social order. Although these brands petition to go against the grain through the garments they produce, those garments are put up for sale and purchased by committed consumers. These individuals become the envy of others because of the clothes they have in their possession, a process which is no different from the broader social push to define oneself through the things they buy. For context, the current season of mainline Maison Margiela pants retail for well above \$600 CAD, with comparable Yohji Yamamoto and Comme des Garçons items selling for similar amounts (*SSENSE*). Given that stock is often limited, the race to own rare and groundbreaking pieces is only intensified in spite of how much they may cost the collector. As aptly put by Baudrillard, “the collector’s sublimity, then, derives not from the nature of the objects he collects (which will vary according to his age, profession, and social milieu) but from his fanaticism... gratification flows from the fact possession depends... on the absolute singularity of each item... [and] on the possibility of a series” (Baudrillard 261). The beauty of high fashion is that objects simultaneously offer uniqueness and the alignment with a broader series (be it a particular line, season, or designer as a whole to achieve that synergy). Collectors are encouraged to organize their closets around the garments they possess, which subsequently has an impact on the organization of their habits and daily life. In exchange for their fanaticism, they are provided with the rush of possession and guidelines for taking stock of their reality.

Overall, the collection and consumption of high-fashion in contemporary society revolves around the concepts of ownership and exhibition of fashion objects. As Aspers and Godart propose: “Fashion represents the clearest sign of a general ‘aestheticization’ of social life

(Postrel 2004)—both material, including most consumer objects and the appearance of the body, and immaterial, including ways to talk and express oneself. In line with this trend, some sociologists have studied the role of fashion as an economically important phenomenon, using terms such as “aesthetic markets” (Aspers 2001) and ‘aesthetic economy’ (Entwistle 2009)” (183). Customers are convinced that collecting these products is crucial in developing cultural capital and creative potential. It is common practice in the modern world to wear clothing, but it is the motivation behind specific clothing choices and the consequent behaviours which arise while striving to obtain such that are worth comparing against Baudrillard’s theories. Kenneth Burke asks audiences to recognize “how overwhelmingly much of what we mean by ‘reality’ has been built up for us through nothing but our symbol systems” (Burke 5). The fashion industry does not merely produce vestimentary property. Fashion is a living symbol system, and the rhetoric of clothing collection sways consumers to pursue the hyperreality of high fashion as a means of making sense of the world around them (albeit often a limited and repetitive view as defined by the confines of their collection for precisely that reason – their collection *is* their world). Being engrossed in the domain of avant-garde apparel is a mode of consumption which fabulously illustrates Baudrillard’s critical analysis of materialist tendencies through a modern-day application.

Appendix



Figure 1. Images of a Maison Martin Margiela inspired tattoo (left), meant to look like the signature tonal stitching used to attach labels to items of clothing, pictured for comparison (right).

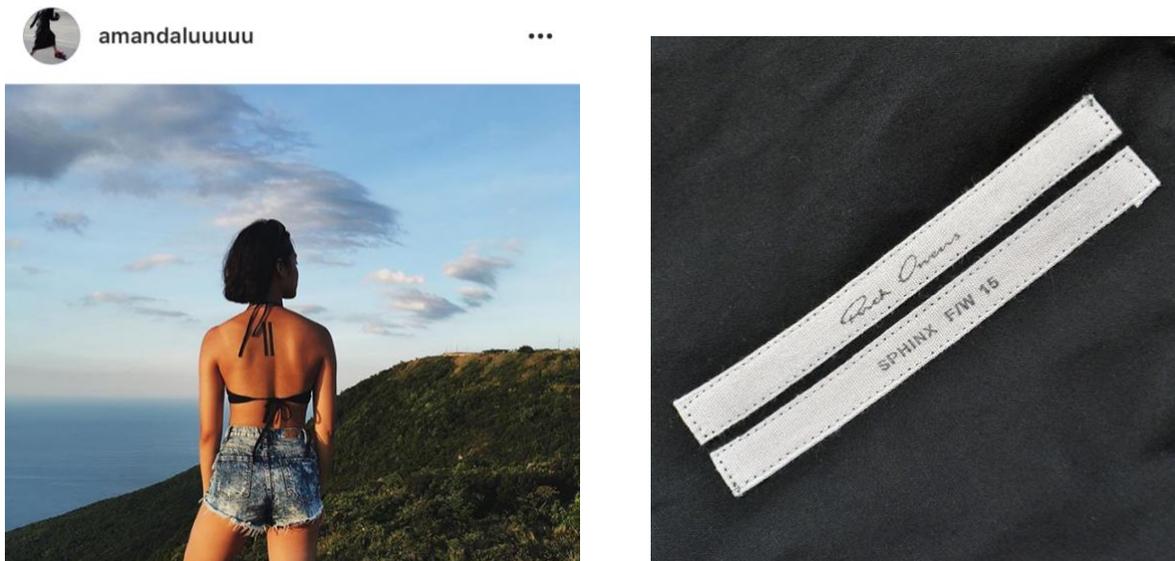


Figure 2. Images of a Rick Owens inspired tattoo (left) and a Fall/Winter 2015 label for comparison (right).

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