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Article

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The Hierarchies of Fashion

Sociologist Alexander Hoppe on Work, Aesthetics, and Attention

Alexander Hoppe

Fashion and sociology are the topics of Alexander Hoppe, Kohli Fellow and Guest Researcher in the Research Group Globalization, Work, and Production. In his current book project, “Routinizing Creativity”, he shows where fashion comes from and how anticipation shapes the labor process. In an interview with Kerstin Schneider, he talks about his research on work, aesthetics, and attention.

Why are you interested in the connection of fashion and sociology?

I became interested in fashion long ago, when I was scouted as a model and a “popular kid” at school (within the American clique system). I learned that appearance is a form of status. I also learned that one can stay on top of popularity, so to speak, by experimenting with looks and by paying close attention to reactions, rumors, etc. I continue to think about this by centering the concepts of attention and aesthetics within social psychology and political economy.

By the time I went to India I was a proper budding sociologist, but still interested in how people make aesthetic decisions. There are various criteria that fashion buyers have to weigh; art versus commerce is an example. I wanted to understand this balance in action, but I ended up discovering a much larger system at work. Buyers have to make decisions across these large swaths of suppliers that are organized within global value chains, and some of these suppliers are very good at what they do.

In an earlier study you conducted an ethnography of fashion weeks for your research on fashion model selections. How can we measure attractiveness?

I studied how fashion weeks are put together by helping to put them together myself. I adopted a variety of roles, including being a judge during model castings. I was surprised that producers and designers didn’t really evaluate attractiveness. Attractiveness is usually defined by psychologists using cues of faces. Composite faces [are reliably appreciated as being attractive](#).

In the situations I studied, judges were interested in other status indicators that have become conventions in professional modeling. In order of importance, these are height, body size (certainly not too large, but not too slim either), and a smooth walk. There is actually quite a lot of variation in how people walk, once you focus on the details. It is one of the deciding factors despite being so hard to talk about, because it’s connected to bodies and it’s often pre-conscious in our perception. One of my goals as a social

psychologist is to find indicators and create a language for the details of how perception works.

Fashion has long since become similar around the world. Hermès and Temu or Primark are at opposite ends of the scale. How do you explain this?

In a famous “blue sweater scene” from “The Devil Wears Prada” film, Meryl Streep, in her role as editor-in-chief of a fashion magazine, traces the color of a discount sweater up through department stores, a group of eight designers, and Yves Saint Laurent up to a collection from Oscar de la Renta. She narrates a movement downward from luxury, explaining how trends trickle down through the hierarchy of the brand system. Although most sociologists have long since given up on the idea of a “trickle-down” movement among consumers in fashion, I find that Meryl Streep’s version is basically right. The key thing is that the trickle-down part happens in the producer market, within a political economy of attention. Designers for Primark are going to look up the brand hierarchy at what Zara is doing, and Zara is going to look at Emporio Armani. But neither Zara or Emporio Armani are ever going to care what Primark is doing. There is also a geographical hierarchy at work. Trend forecasting reports and images, which are often the basis for design inspiration, overrepresent the Western fashion capitals of New York, Paris, London, and Milan.

Many thinkers have published a lot about status and how status is expressed. Fashion has changed a lot in recent years. In many cities like Berlin fashion has become much more casual. What does this tell us about society and about ourselves?

Democratization and informalization are long historical processes. My adviser Randy Collins once looked at this, arguing that changes from the 1870s to 1950s often originated with the upper classes, especially through sports. Sweaters are one example, first worn for golf. The decline of “separate spheres” between men and women has played a huge part as well, with dating starting in the 1920s in the U.S. Before that, the courtship of women had taken place at home. Sexual displays became more visible then, and again in the 1960s and 1970s. Fashions to shape the body itself have become more prominent since: Pilates, weightlifting, yoga, diets. Tattoos have become increasingly normalized; they’re only distinctive now with full bodies or with facial tattoos. Plastic surgery is increasingly common in the Americas and East Asia. At any rate, while dating is less institutionalized in Germany than in the U.S., I would imagine that gay pride and youth movements have had a similar impact on sexual displays. One final comment: The Covid-19 pandemic is not as responsible for informalization as most people think, including most people within the fashion world. It contributed, sure, but it’s more of an easy answer. It’s just the first thing people think of.

How will your research help us understand the global labor process and the transnational and production of status, quality, and value?

At the WZB I am in the research group Globalization, Work, and Production. The agenda is to study how work is changing amidst the competitive dynamics of globalization. This is so important to actually investigate. In the U.S. 97 percent of clothing is imported. Most of us assume it's made in sweatshops in faraway places, so we've more or less stopped thinking about it. But it's not just that it's easy or ethically convenient to forget about it. It's that we assume we know this, so the phenomenon is no longer interesting. My work picks up industrial sociology, which peaked in the 1950 to 1960s, and reanimates it by doing fieldwork again in the international division of labor, including among managers. I find that quite a lot has changed. Perhaps most notably, suppliers in emerging Asian economies are far more competent and more creative than we have assumed. We are not just seeing cutting and assembly in India, but also fashion design. Brands like Zara and Primark come to India looking to pick up designs that suppliers have already put together for them. So when we wear this season's latest thing, it might be a very global thing not just in its execution, but in its conception.

Alexander D. Hoppe is a Kohli Fellow and Guest Researcher in the Research Group Globalization, Work, and Production. He studies the microfoundations of capitalism, with particular interest in the fashion industry.

Literature

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