

The Eternal Return of the New — The Aesthetics of Fashion in Walter Benjamin

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ABSTRACT. The eternal is far more the ruffle on a dress than some idea” (Benjamin, 1999, p. 69). This brief quote can be taken as the cornerstone of Benjamin’s fragmentary Philosophy of Fashion. In order to accomplish such ongoing project the author appeals not to canonical representatives of classical Aesthetics, but rather to the tripod formed by Baudelaire, Grandville and the surrealists. They are the ones who provide the main elements of his presentation of the primal history of the nineteenth century configured through the dialectical tension between *old* and *modern*. In the *Arcades Projects* such movement is described by an expression as accurate as fruitful; the *eternal return of the new*. It is the key reading to understand Benjamin’s nightmarish constellation of modernity as the own mimesis of hell. This research is funded by FAPESP.

1. The Dandy as Hero of Modernity

Baudelaire is the first to use the term *modernité* in the sense that later would become famous. In the essay on Constantin Guy he writes: “Modernity is the transient, the fleeting, the contingent; it is one half of art, the other being the eternal and the immutable”. This definition originally appeared in an article published in 1869 in the volume *L’Art Romantique*. The seminal text “The Painter of modern life” presents *in nuce* the connection between the eternal (*Ideal*) and the transient (*Spleen*) as the own core of his peculiar aesthetic conception. Calling attention to the complementarity between the extremes of the *universal* and the *particular* within his seminal artistic theory, the author insists on valuing the transitory element, without which would subsist only the emptiness of an “abstract and indefinible kind of beauty”. As the author claims, this double dimension of art is

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somehow analogous to the fatal duality of man; the eternally remaining part would be the “soul” while the variable aspect would be the “body” of the work. Defender of the circumstance’s beauty rather than a unique and absolute idea of beautiful, the admirer of Daumier and Gavarni observes: “The pleasure we derive from the representation of the present is due not only to the beauty that it can be enclosed, but also to its essential quality of present”.

That is why his vision of modernity results inseparable of the praise of fashion and of those heroic actors, whose special sensitivity is able to extract the beautiful from the everyday life; the painter of costumes, the poet, the *flâneur* and especially the dandy. Not by chance Baudelaire dedicates all the ninth chapter of his essay on modernity to the characterization of what he refers to as “passion transformed into doctrine”, “institution outside the law”, “sort of cult of oneself” or even “religion”: the Dandyism. “Fastidious, unbelievables, *beaux*, lions or dandies: which ever label these men claim for themselves, one and all stem from the same origin, all share the same characteristic of opposition and revolt; all are representatives of what is best in human pride, of that need, which is too rare in the modern generation, to combat and destroy triviality” (Baudelaire, 1992, p. 197). Highlighting the fact that these “out-of-work Hercules” are fortunately liberated from the compulsory exercise of a job, he remarks that such beings have no other occupation besides cultivating the idea of beauty in their own persons, feeling and thinking. Attributing to this privileged circle of initiates the incarnation of a certain aristocratic moral endangered by the predominance of bourgeois imperatives such as work, productivity and marriage, Baudelaire shows that the only concern of the dandy would be “runing to the pursuit of happiness”. Freed from the hideous shackles of usefulness, this “haughty caste” seems to have been gifted both with time and money, without which fantasy, reduced to a state of sterile reverie could hardly be translated into action. Hence all their ritualistic conduct of life is based on rigorous aesthetic criteria.

The author points out that instead of what common sense might believe the true dandy is recognized not simply through his immoderate taste for dressing and material elegance. These characteristics represent merely a symbol of the “aristocratic superiority” of his spirit. Inflamed by a “burning need to create originality” (Baudelaire, 1992, p. 195), this methodical

worship of himself apparently brings to the dandy a uncomparable “pleasure of astonishing” and at the same time “the proud satisfaction of never being astonished” (Baudelaire, 1992, p. 195). The reason for which he “may be blasé or he may be a sufferer; but, in this last case, he will smile like the Lacedemonian being bitten by the fox” (Baudelaire, 1992, p. 195). Referring to such model of self-control as a kind of disciple of a strange spirituality, Baudelaire appeals to the comparison with Stoicism and even religion to elucidate the paradoxical traits of this quite sophisticated “seriousness in frivolity”. “For those who are both priests and victims, all the complex material conditions which they accept, from the impeccable clothes every hour of the day and night, to the most dangerous acrobatics of sports, are merely gymnastics suitable for strengthening the will and disciplining the soul” (Baudelaire, 1992 p. 195). The author continues his spiritual portrayal of Dandyism, approximating this extravagant “doctrine of elegance and originality” to the strict standards set by the monastic order of the *Vieux de la Montagne*— which required to its followers nothing less than committing suicide! According to Baudelaire, dandies’ attitude is guided by a formula as ennobling as terrible: “*perinde ac cadaver*” (in the manner of a corpse)! Because of such radical and sublime discipline they configure “the last flare of heroism in a period of decadence” (Baudelaire, 1992, p. 197).

By demonstrating total mastery over their impulses, passions and appetites, these exquisite “heroes of modernity” follow the basic commandments of Baudelaire’s aesthetic canons which are absolutely contrary to accepting the naïve thesis of art as mere mimesis of *physis*. According to him most errors concerning beauty come from the 18th century’s false conception on morality. At this time nature was taken as both origin and form of all that was considered good and beautiful. As the author argues nature forces man to sleep, to eat, to drink and to protect himself against hostilities of the weather, nothing more. Apart from the exclusive domain of the most fundamental needs of the species, it is perfectly useless. That is why the realm of “luxury and pleasure” should not be judged based on natural coordinates. “Crime, the taste for which the human animal draws from the womb of his mother, is natural in the origins. Virtue, on the contrary, is artificial and supernatural” (Baudelaire, 1992, p. 201). With Hobbes and against Rousseau, Baudelaire states that “evil is done effort-

lessly, and naturally, by fate; the good is always the product of some art” (Baudelaire, 1992, p. 201). Precisely for that, natural criteria should not be promoted to the status nor of ethical neither of aesthetic canons. For him, the mistake of obeying the laws dictated by ”simple nature” as artistic or moral rules would be so terrible as encouraging the return to the most abject barbarism – whose consequence would inevitably be chaos, destruction and death.

Thus pursuing the high purpose of “seeking the beautiful even in its most minute manifestations” the author synthesizes his appreciation of fashion as a sign of the everlasting “taste for the ideal”, or rather as a “permanent reformation of nature” (Baudelaire, 1992, p. 203). As he notes “all fashions have their charm” since it indicates an effort, more or less successful, towards beauty. In this sense it represents a form of getting close to an ideal whose desire constantly excites the unsatisfied human condition. He advises tough: “Fashions should not be considered dead things”. Taking the example of discarded clothing, “loose and lifeless” as the skin of Saint Barthelemy hanging up in the closet of a secondhand-clothes dealer, he claims: ”You have to imagine them brought to life and animated by the beautiful women who wore them. Only this way you will understand their meaning and their spirit” (Baudelaire, 1992, p. 203). In regard to the right – or even duty – of the woman to appear “magic and supernatural”, Baudelaire compares her existence to an idol’s, “who should be covered with gold in order to be worshiped” (Baudelaire, 1992, p. 203). As a means to accomplish such goal he legitimates all kinds of tools and resources used to deify the female fragile beauty, thus raising her above the severe limitations imposed by nature.

2. The Naturalization of History

However in the context of the aesthetic modernity of the 19th century Benjamin will emphasize that such fight against natural laws occurs not by way of a strict and one-dimensional negation of its principles and patterns, but instead as a rather peculiar kind of transforming mimesis, whose model will be given by J. J. Grandville. In the archive “G” of the *Arcades Project*, he notes: “Grandville’s masking of nature with the fashions of mid-century – nature understood as the cosmos, as well as the world of animals

and plants – lets history, in the guise of fashion, be derived from the eternal cycle of nature” (Benjamin, 1999. p. 200). As a matter of fact such metamorphoses are widely recognized as one of the greatest features of Grandville’s imageries, whose remarkable illustrations are usually based on such strange and funny fusions among human, animal and vegetal domains. Not by chance Benjamin refers to this particular trait of his *oeuvre* as a kind of comic-cosmic style rather adequate to depict the so-called secularization of *physis*. So that some of his most influential works such as *La Sibille des Salons* (1827), *Les Métamorphoses du Jour* (1829), *Scènes de la vie privée et publique des animaux* (1841-42) and *Les Fleurs Animées* (1847) are conceived under this prolific constructive principle.

Contrary to what one may believe Grandville’s amazing hybrid typologies are meant not only to amuse but also to ironize the bizarre naturalization of private behaviors and public vices. Apparently the Monarchy of July has offered him plenty of opportunities to exercise his talent and at the same time express his progressive republican and anticlerical ideas published in several periodics of the Second Empire such as *La Silhouette*, *L’Artiste*, *La Caricature* and *Le Chivari*. The budget of the Estate, the abuse of political power and the ridicule of social conventions were some of his most favorite themes. After 1835 though due to the reinstitution of prior censorship of caricature Grandville was compelled to change the main focus of this work from the political satire to the illustration of literary classics such as the fables of La Fontaine, *Don Quixote*, *The voyages of Gulliver* and *Robson Crusoe*. In any case he was a master in composing ambiguous figures in which individuals with the bodies of men and faces of animals were designed to play the human comedy directed by an inexorable kind of “nature-history”. While in *La Sibille des Salons* (1827) Grandville produces an amazing ensemble of 53 zoomorphic lithographies to be used as a tarot deck, in *Les Fleurs Animées* (1847) he will stress the bond between life of human beings and plants representing women’s qualities in the form of a lively botanical typologie. Dalias, lillies, violets, poppies and so many other flowers are portrayed and described as animated entities with characteristics, vestments and accessories adequated to each profile. Stems and leaves play the role of skirts and dresses while petals become ornaments for the hair or exotic colorful hats, giving shape to an inspired humanization of *Art nouveau* floral patterns.

Despite the great variety of pictures created under this same cosmologic trend, it is *Une autre monde* (1844) that will occupy a privileged place in Benjamin's *Arcades Project* as a perfect emblem of the process designated by the author as a cyclic naturalization of history.

“When Grandville presents a new fan as the ‘fan of Iris’, when the Milky Way appears as an ‘avenue’ illuminated at night by gas lamps, when the moon reposes on fashionable velvet cushions instead of on clouds, then history is being secularized and drawn into a natural context as relentlessly as it was three hundred years earlier with allegory” (Benjamin, 1999, p. 200-201).

This short note enhances the meaningful analogies between his ongoing theory of modernity and his previous studies on the Baroque. At *Origin of the German Tragic Drama* the author shows that since the 17th century history has been represented as an implacable natural process which paradigm is given by the paintings of *Vanitas*—commonly associated with the *Still life* genre in northern Europe, especially in Flanders and Netherlands. Extracted from the book of Ecclesiastes, the Latin motto *Vanitas vanitatum et omnia vanitas* (Vanity of vanities, all is vanity) is widely appropriated as one of the preferred themes of the Baroque period. In brief it consists of several allegorical objects carefully arranged and portrayed in order to remind viewers of the transience character of earthly life. Then, chronometers, clocks and clepsydras mark the length and passage of time; empty glasses allude to nothingness; bubbles and extinguished candles indicate evanescence; smoke suggests phantasmagoria; globes recall mundanity; faded flowers hint decay; rotten fruits mean degeneration; musical instruments refer to Arts and the pleasure of the senses; books represent science and human knowledge; swords signify military conquests; shells evoke birth and fertility; other objects, such as crowns, jewellery, coins, fabric, garments and noble ornaments all denote wealth, power, luxury and beauty. Ultimately all these aforementioned images emphasize the futile nature of all worldly things and proclaim the persuasive teachings of *Memento mori*: “Remember you will die”.

This idea is central not only to the book on the Baroque, but also to Benjamin's late theory on fashion. In the archive “B” of the *Arcades Project* the explicit the relationship between fashion and death with two

suggestive epigraphs: “Fashion: Madam Death! Madam Death” (Leopardi in: Benjamin, 1999, p. 62) borrowed from Giacomo Leopardi, and “Nothing dies; all is transformed” (Balzac in: Benjamin, 1999, p. 62) extracted from Balzac’s writings. Following Baudelaire, the author states that the most typical characteristic of fashion is its necessary denial of the natural course of things – whose final destination is always destruction and death. According to him fashion is defined as the cunning by which woman cheats death. He notes: “Fashion was never anything other than the (...) provocation of death through the woman” (Benjamin, 1999, p. 63). In regard to the continuous transformations in woman’s appearance, he claims: “That is why she changes so quickly; she titilates death and is already something diferent, something new, as it casts about to crush her” (Benjamin, 1999, p. 63).

3. An Allegorical Alchemy

Nevertheless one might ask: “But how exactly does fashion engender the new and therefore tricks death?” According to Benjamin’s thesis it is absolutely not by a casual process of creation “out of the blue”, but rather through a quite precise method compared to a profane mode of allegorical alchemy. In effect the rehabilitation of allegory against the romantic hegemony of symbol is one of the main accomplishments of the book on the Baroque and will be recurrent in all the late Benjaminian production. In brief the allegorical transmutation consists of a systematic procedure through which dead things are somehow reanimated and brought to life as pure signification. Such operation was already present in Benjamin’s essay on Baudelaire and will be also identified as a prominent feature in the artistic *démarche* of the surrealists.

In his essay “Surrealism, the Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia”, Benjamin attributes to the circle of Breton the remarkable achievement of perceiving the enormous “revolutionary energies” impregnated in the “outmoded”; in the first iron constructions, old factory buildings, earliest photos, grand pianos, dresses of five years ago, fashionable restaurants when the vogue has begun to ebb from them. Following Benjamin’s approach, the own notion of surrealist object could be taken as the kernel of such allegorical transubstantiation of the outdated. Extracted from

the original context in which these things were meant to be useful as mere commodities, they are reappropriated and therefore “saved” from the imminent extinction by such artist-allegorists. Redeemed by a sort of “re-auratization”, old-fashioned stuff is preserved from being discarded and by this means promoted as something entirely new. In other words, ordinary merchadises are rescued from becoming obsolete and consumed by death, thus reborning as a quite singular form of art.

Not by chance in the *Manifest of Surrealism* Breton compares their artistic procedure to the most elevated kind of *opus*; Alchemy. Against purely ornamental or stylistic appropriations of this method, he defends that such equation should be understood not merely as a figure of speech or a poetic metaphor, but instead as the own core of a major technique from which all their eclectic creative production is derived; *collage*. Meaningfully the same association has been already used by a pioneer and great genius of such artistic operation, Max Ernst. In the essay “Au delà de la peinture”, he defines collage as “something like the alchemy of the visual image. The miracle of the total transfiguration of beings and objects with or without modification of their physical or anatomical aspect”. Moreover he deliberately describes collage as

“an alchemical composition of two or several heterogeneous elements resulting in their unexpected union, due to a will trending (...) toward the systematic confusion and derrangement of all the senses (Rimbaud) either by chance, or a will favoring chance” (Ernst, 2003, p. 170).

He also refers to the procedure of collage as the “exploitation of the fortuitous encounter of two distant realities on a plane that does not suit them” (Ernst, 2003, p. 170), paraphrasing the famous sentence of Lautréamont: “Beautiful as the chance meeting on a dissection table of a sewing machine and an umbrella”. As one may notice many parallels can be traced between the alchemical *oeuvre* and the collage process. The alchemist must find the primal matter to begin the work as Ernst and others have found preexisting images to make their collages and paintings. Then the original material was destroyed, as wood engravings or other found images were cut from their original context. The separated parts were recombined, fused by fire

in a proper vessel and pasted in the collage. While the goal for the alchemist was turning metals into gold; for the surrealists it was transmutating ordinary things in a new form of art. It is precisely this trait of their work that apparently provided the basic principles for Benjamin elucidating the “eccentric and revolutionary possibilities of fashion” (Benjamin, 1999, p. 68) in connection with Grandville’s cosmologies and Surrealism. In the archive “B” of the *Arcades Project*, he quotes a passage from Apollinaire’s *Poète assassiné*:

“This year’, said Tristouse, ‘fashions are bizarre and common, simple and full of fantasy. Any material from nature’s domain can now be introduced into the composition of women’s clothes. I saw a charming dress made of corks... A major designer is thinking about launching tailor-made outfits made of old bookbindings done in calf... Fish bones are being worn a lot on hats. One often sees delicious young girls dressed like pilgrims of Saint James of Compostella; their outfits, as is fitting, are studded with coquilles Saint-Jacques. Steel, wool, sandstone, and files have suddenly entered the vestimentary arts... Feathers now decorate not only hats but shoes and gloves; and next year they’ll be on umbrellas. They’re doing shoes in Venetian glass and hats in Baccarat crystal... I forgot to tell you that last Wednesday I saw on the boulevards an old dowager dressed in mirrors stuck to fabric. The effect was sumptuous in the sunlight. You’d have thought it was a gold mine out for a walk. Later it started raining and the lady looked like a silver mine... Fashion is becoming practical and no longer looks down on anything. It ennobles everything. It does for materials what the Romantics did for words.” (Apollinaire in: Benjamin, 1999, p. 70).

As Apollinaire suggests fashion does for natural matter what romantic poets did for written language; they transformed a predictable realm into an infinite universe loaded with the most supernatural and fantastic possibilities. That is why Benjamin claims that “fashion is the predecessor – no, the eternal deputy – of Surrealism” (Benjamin, 1999, p. 64). Such idea is nuclear to understand his presentation of the primal history (*Urgeschichte*) based on the configuration of the oneiric images (Bretas, 2008) produced by capitalist phantasmagorias as a sort of *collage* or juxtaposition of different layers of time (*Zeit-raum; Zeit-traum*) – namely the Baroque of the 17th,

the Second Empire of the 19th, and the aesthetic modernity of the 20th century.

4. The Eternal Return of the New

So in introducing the groundings of his still emergent dialectics of the old and the new, Benjamin sketches the essential co-existence of modern and antique as one of the greatest working hypotheses of the *Arcades Project*. Such polar tension would be responsible for the constitution of a dream-like form of collective experience whose fantastic traces might be perceived in “a thousand configurations of life, from enduring buildings to passing fashions” (Benjamin, 1999, p. 894). In the “Exposé of 1935” he notes:

“Corresponding to the form of the new means of production, which in the beginning is still ruled by the form of the old, are, in the social superstructure, wish images in which the new and the old interpenetrate in fantastic fashion. This interpenetration derives its fantastic character, above all, from the fact that what is old in the current of social development never clearly stands out from what is new, while the latter, in an effort to disengage from the antiquated, regenerates archaic, primordial elements. The utopian images which accompany the emergence of the new always, at the same time, reach back to the primal past. In the dream in which each epoch entertains images of its successor, the latter appears wedded to elements of primal history” (Benjamin, 1999, p. 893).

Stressing – with Baudelaire – the necessary interpenetration between the eternal and the transitory – that is, between ancient figures and current fashions – as the quintessential feature of modernity’s fancies, Benjamin describes a powerful dialectic movement whose energy is constantly charged by the fetish character of commodity. Not by chance the author associates Grandville’s “subtleties” to Marx’s “theological niceties” of merchandises. He writes: “If the commodity was a fetish, Grandville was the tribal sorcerer” (Benjamin, 1999, p. 186). This brief note confirms Benjamin’s reading of Grandville’s hybrid compositions as a fine expression of an enchanting naturalization of historical dynamics broadly assimilated as

a kind of cosmologic law. That is why he observes: “The planetary fashions of Grandville are so many parodies, drawn by nature, of human history. Grandville’s harlequinades turn into Blanqui’s plaintive ballads” (Benjamin, 1999, p. 201).

Not accidentally written in a prison cell, Blanqui’s mournful *L’éternité par les astres* turns out to be an important source of a great deal of Benjamin’s primal history’s theory – specially after the harsh interferences of Adorno and the Institute for Social Research. In any case, Benjamin’s late drafts incorporate Blanqui’s idea on the *répétition du mythe* as an extreme counterpart of the modern *pathos of nouveauté*. In short the socialist activist imprisoned during the reign of Louis Philippe sketches an intriguing conception of the universe in which everything has already happened and at the same time will happen forever in an eternal recurrence of itself – thus quite similarly to the words whispered by Nietzsche’s demon in the forth book of the *Gay Science*:

“This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and every thing immeasurably small or great in your life must return to you – all in the same succession and sequence – even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned over and over, and you with it, a dust grain of dust” (Nietzsche in: Benjamin, 1999, p. 118).

In a remarkable synchronicity with Nietzsche’s vision Blanqui’s reflections are exactly the following:

“Every human being is thus eternal at every second of his or her existence. What I write at his moment in a cell of the Fort du Taureau I have written and shall write throughout all eternity – at a table, with a pen, clothed as I am now, in circumstances like these. And thus it is for everyone. [...] Always and everywhere in the terrestrial arena, the same drama, the same setting, on the same narrow stage – a noisy humanity infatuated with its own grandeur, believing itself to be the universe and living in its prison as though in some immense realm, only to founder at an early date along with its globe, which has borne with deepest disdain the burden of human arrogance. The

same monotony, the same immobility. [...] The universe repeats itself endlessly and paws the ground in place. In infinity, eternity performs – imperturbably – the same routines” (Blanqui in: Benjamin, 1999, p. 114-115).

Meaningfully Blanqui completes his speculation with a statement that is apparently crucial to Benjamin elaborate his own dialectics of the eternal and the new as one of the most prominent traits of modern times: “The new is always old, and the old always new” (Blanqui in: Benjamin, 1999, p. 114). Quite similarly to Baroque’s natural-historical conception of a closed universe ruled only by fate, Blanqui’s theses compose an hermetic cosmos from which every possibility of freedom or creation is definitively excluded – like in a nightmare. Not by chance Benjamin compares such constellation to the own representation of hell.

“The ‘modern’, the time of hell. The punishments of hell are always the newest going in this domain. What is at issue is not that ‘the same thing happens over and over’, and even less would it be a question here of eternal return. It is rather that precisely in which it is newest the face of the world never alters, that his newest remains, in every respect, the same. – This constitutes the eternity of hell. To determine the totality of traits by which the ‘modern’ is defined would be to represent hell” (Benjamin, 1999, p. 544).

Ultimately Benjamin’s Aesthetics of Fashion leads to an epistemologic-political thesis that associates the cult of *nouveauté* in the last instance derived from the belief on the concept of progress – and the idea of the eternal return as two opposite poles of the same “mythical mode of thought” (Benjamin, 1999, p. 119) dominated by the fetish character of commodity. For him awaking from this *cauchemardesque* configuration would be the main task of the dialectical thinking.

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