CHAPTER 7

Dressing as an Ordinary Aesthetic Practice

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to briefly present a new perspective on fashion as an ordinary aesthetics, based on Wittgenstein's later aesthetic conception. In order to analyse the ordinary dimension of fashion, I will start from Giovanni Matteucci's account of fashion as an aesthetic phenomenon as presented in his *Philosophical Perspectives on Fashion* (2017). There, Matteucci introduces the idea of juxtaposing the Wittgensteinian concept of "form of life" to fashion. Accordingly, my aim in this paper is to show the resemblances between the Wittgensteinian concept of "form of life" and the ordinary practice of dressing, and to characterize thereby the aesthetic connotations of the practice of fashion. I will claim that the act of dressing everyday structurally employs a kind of language which can be defined as aesthetic – according to Wittgenstein's aesthetic account as presented during his Lectures in Cambridge in 1933 and 1938. Conclusively, I argue that in fashion (intended as everyday dressing) there is an interrelation between the grammar of language and socially encoded aesthetic responses: fashion sets new rules that define the meaning of dresses; these rules, in turn, are not eternal since they follow fashion's cyclical seasonality and personal good taste. Thus, anyone who daily commits to the practices of clothing can acquire sensitivity to the rules and train within the same "grammar of dressing."

Keywords: Fashion, Aesthetic Rules, Wittgenstein, Form of Life, Grammar

1 Introduction

Since the study of fashion has been undertaken within several disciplines over time, finding a clear and exact definition of the term "fashion" is a challenging matter. In fact, I believe there is no single definition of this term that is capable of explaining every distinctive aspect of the phenomenon. Take for example Kawamura's (2005, p. 43) definition, which takes fashion to be "a system of institutions, organizations,

groups, producers, events and practices." Although Kawamura's interpretation of fashion is quite precise and exhaustive, it is arguable that the term "fashion" carries even more significance than he allows, insofar as, say, fashion is also a general cultural or soft-cultural phenomenon.

Until recently, this ordinary dimension of fashion, as a practice embedded in our lives and cultures, has received comparatively little attention in philosophy. Yet there is reason to consider this ordinary dimension of fashion as an aesthetic phenomenon in modern times. Nowadays, a multitude of aesthetic elements are intertwined with our life (see Di Stefano 2012) and the routine of dressing and its ordinariness have acquired an aesthetic form: dressing ourselves daily is not only a practical task that we accomplish in order to be decent or attractive to other people, but it concerns aesthetic properties and values. In this paper, I aim at briefly introducing a philosophical account of the intrinsic aesthetic mechanisms behind our ordinary practice of dressing, inspired by Wittgenstein's later aesthetic considerations. To this end, in this first section I first say a bit more about the ordinary aesthetic dimension of clothing.

2 The Ordinary Aesthetic Dimension of Clothing

The ordinary dimension of fashion regards a routine that "remains with people over time" (Buckley and Clark 2012, p. 19). We experience fashion every day without noticing that we are experiencing it. Since "the everyday is beneath our attention (Sheringham 2006, p. 22)", dressing ourselves is perceived to be obvious, and thereby it escapes our notice.[1] In fashion the perception of everydayness is hard to locate since fashion is mostly identified with modernity, fastness, fleetingness. However, if we pay attention to how fashion works, we can easily see that fashion is able to create a conjunction between modernity (intended as velocity and variableness) and everydayness.

To be sure, fashion as a system is perceived as extraordinary, extravagant, uncommon, since it has to do with runways, luxury brands, seasonality and renewing trends: it aims at producing allure for its objects, pushing the mass to consume the most of what is created: "fashion provides products which are bought because of the

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[1] "The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something – because it is always before one's eyes.) […] And this means: we fail to be struck by what, once seen, is most striking and most powerful" (Wittgenstein 1953, §129).

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attractiveness of the meta-goods that are attached to them" (Meinhold 2013, p. 135). However, in truth fashion is both ordinary − in its everyday dimension − and extraordinary – insofar as the system of fashion sets the seasonality and the novelty. People constantly dress themselves and, in this way, depict their interpretation of fashion cycles. Accordingly, the question arises about the extent to which the practice of dressing daily is intertwined with aesthetics, and indeed about how such practice shapes our interaction with reality underneath the surface (see Matteucci 2016).

Regarding this latter issue, I believe that a philosophical consideration of the ordinary dimension of fashion is needed. Traditionally, fashion has been considered lacking in a solid theoretical basis inasmuch as it is treated as a "a bundle of problems that join together in an irregular manner" (Matteucci 2017, p. 13); luckily, in his *Philosophical Perspectives on Fashion* (2017), Matteucci has recently presented a comparison between four analytical aesthetic theories and fashion, showing that a systematic philosophical account of the phenomenon of fashion is not beyond our reach. In my view, the juxtaposition of Wollheim's (1968) aesthetic theory to fashion could be the best option to describe the ordinary aspect of fashion providing a new perspective of fashion in everyday life.

Outlining what is to be understood as art and as aesthetics, Wollheim (1968, §45, §46-49, §51-53, §55) compares art to a "form of life." Invoking the Wittgensteinian concept of "form of life" in aesthetics implies considering experiential and cultural practices in which the subjects involved express themselves by drawing a horizon of shared taste. However, expressing one's own horizon of taste does not mean establishing a static set of signs or indexes to represent things, following a semiotic *modus operandi*. On the contrary, drawing a horizon of taste is to bring out the physiognomy of things in a common way, one expressing familiarity. A system of familiar aesthetic relations, in this sense, is manifested through various forms of taste, such as art and, as I wish to show below, even fashion.

3 The Philosophical Investigations and the Lectures on Aesthetics

In order to apply the concept of "form of life" to fashion, it is essential first of all to introduce these very concepts and other correlated notions, with respect to Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. As I started to hint above, to invoke the concept of 'form of life' is to appeal to a set of habits, intrinsic experiences, indeed

a language and its uses. This *Übereinstimmung* constitutes an intersubjective agreement situated in language, which is interpreted as a universal medium and as a place of consensus and possible constitution of experience in the world (Borutti 1993, p. 1). Language as a form of life is a condition of a possible community. The concept of "form of life" is tied by Wittgenstein to the concept of language (cf. Wittgenstein 1953, §19 − §23) and, consequently, to the concept of "language game" Language games, Wittgenstein says, are "objects of comparison which are meant to throw light on the facts of our language by way not only of similarities, but also of dissimilarities" (Wittgenstein 1953, §130). Language games are models that expand our way of looking at language and allow us to observe its multiplicity. By talking of "games", Wittgenstein intended to stress the importance of rules and *regularity*: "the rule may be an aid in teaching the game" (Wittgenstein 1953, §54). One can learn a rule either by observing a game or by playing it. In the latter case, a player can understand the rules of a game directly through practice.

In the case of language, this means that one can understand the meaning of different words in a language game and the specific rules governing their use, as the game allows access to a field of application of the words themselves (the use of the words in language). In fact, Wittgenstein affirms also that "without these rules, the word has no meaning, and if the rules change also the meaning changes" (Wittgenstein 1953, §552). By following the rule, one can understand, at the same time, what the rule is and how to apply it.

Furthermore, "also 'obeying a rule' is a practice", according to Wittgenstein. "And to *think* one is obeying a rule is not to obey a rule. Hence it is not possible to obey a rule 'privately': otherwise thinking one was obeying a rule would be the same thing as obeying it" (Wittgenstein 1953, §202). In fact, to follow a rule is a public practice as it implies the recognition of the rule by people who follow the same rule: it requires approvals, disapprovals, gestures, orders that enforce the rule, and so on. According to Wittgenstein, these are "grammatical annotations" on the expression of following a rule that concerns habits upon which humans agree.

Now that I have briefly clarified Wittgenstein's notions of "form of life", "language game" and "rule", we can take into consideration his aesthetic conception. Concerning the latter, it is indispensable to mention Wittgenstein's *Lectures in 1930 − 33* and *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology, and Religious Belief*. There, Wittgenstein (1967, 1:1)

starts by investigating what could be meant by 'Aesthetics', claiming that the aesthetic field "is very big and entirely misunderstood." Wittgenstein primarily focused on the use of aesthetic expressions and their linguistic form, exploring how and where aesthetic judgments are employed in daily life. He counters traditional aesthetic discourse by paying attention to what happens in real life, claiming that "what we do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use" (Wittgenstein 1953, § 48). The issue is localizing the source of what Wittgenstein called "aesthetic puzzlement": when we encounter certain artworks, we experience disquiet or aesthetic discomfort and, at the very same time, we feel confused on the source of our experience (Johannessen 2004, p. 17).

According to Wittgenstein, the concept of aesthetics deals with whether something is working or not, if it is pleasant or unpleasant, if it has the right expression or the right gesture – or not. In other words, aesthetics is about understanding whether something is right or wrong, and indeed about providing reasons for this. With respect to understanding something correctly in aesthetics, Wittgenstein (1967, 1:11-12) significantly mentions aesthetic rules. In fact, acquiring familiarity with a set of *aesthetic rules* is essential to grasp criteria of aesthetic correctness or aesthetic incorrectness. Consequently, the more accurate our knowledge of aesthetic rules is, the more appropriate our aesthetic judgments will be. In fact, as Wittgenstein claimed (1967, 1:15), aesthetic rules are vital to aesthetic judgments, for "if I hadn't learnt the rules, I wouldn't be able to make the aesthetic judgement. In learning the rules, you get a more and more refined judgement. Learning the rules actually changes your judgement."

The meaning of an aesthetic judgment, and indeed of all the aesthetic activities that surround it, can be found within the socio-cultural context in which the judgement is used, and thus, ultimately, in its role in our "way of living." In a way, our paradigms of aesthetic evaluation are as obscure or complicated as is their intertwining with our form of cultural life: they cannot be easily grasped by concepts. In fact, expressions of aesthetic judgement show complicated roles within the culture of a historic period. As Richard Shusterman affirms (1986, p. 99), "our aesthetic concepts are inextricably bound up in our form of life, in ways of living which change over history through social, technical and even theoretical developments". To understand and describe an aesthetic language game, it seems necessary to adopt aesthetic practices through which it is possible to develop aesthetic sensitivity.

Lastly, another essential element in Wittgenstein's conception of aesthetics is the notion of an aesthetic reaction, Aesthetic reactions involve expressions and gestures aimed at the object that prompts them. According to Wittgenstein (1967, 2:10), aesthetic reactions are of great significance in addressing the concept of aesthetics: in fact, through aesthetic reactions it is possible to go back to the reason – as opposed to the cause – which motivates our aesthetic reactions in the first place. The aim is trying to resolve our aesthetic puzzlement by giving aesthetic explanations. Indeed, as Wittgenstein (2016, 9:27) pointed out: "The question of Aesthetics is not: Do you like it? But, if you do, why do you?" Aesthetic impressions and reactions cannot be explained by external-causal matters: "There is a 'Why?' to aesthetic discomfort not a 'cause' to it" (Wittgenstein 1967, 2:19).

4 Dressing According to the Rules: The Aesthetic Form of Life

Keeping in mind what we have said so far, it is now possible to briefly delineate an aesthetic theory of fashion mechanism. My aim is to see if the ordinary dimensions of fashion can be compared with the Wittgensteinian perspective, or, equivalently, to evaluate the extent to which Wittgenstein's aesthetic conception can be fruitfully juxtaposed to fashion.

First, the act of dressing ourselves in our daily routine displays a series of aesthetic rules, according to which we match our fashion items. The rules concerning fashion are arbitrary because they are tied to the context and the historical period in which they develop: they are not eternal, for they follow a temporal cyclic evolution immanent to fashion itself. In fact, as Finnish philosopher Hanne Appelqvist (2019, p. 988) points out, "the rules can be changed and abandoned as we go along." Therefore, the meaning of clothes is linked to different ordinary contexts and so it depends upon the use we make of them: just like the meaning of a word can change according to its use and the context of its employment, so too a garment worn in a certain way or in a certain place and time can acquire different meanings. The act of dressing following the aesthetic rules that govern a certain context is an action – which ultimately constitutes a practice. Furthermore, aesthetic rules are mostly explained and understood by means of practice; in fact, precise training is required to dress properly. This training can be both *stricto sensu* practical, as we exercise inventing new matches of items, and practical in a wider sense, insofar as language is a practice, and we certainly employ language in aesthetic training, through

"expressions of agreement, rejection, expectation, encouragement (cf. Wittgenstein 1953, §208)."[2]

With exercise and training one can access the 'grammar of dressing' — i.e. the set of rules on how to dress — thanks to which it is possible to learn, on the one hand, how to apply the rules in the right context, and on the other hand, how to acquire a competent judgment on fashion-related matters.[3] In this way, we can become sensitive to the rules that govern the phenomenon of fashion. And the more we become sensitive to these rules, the more we will be likely to become experts in the field of fashion. By becoming familiar with the "grammar of dressing" it is also possible to create interpretative spaces of fashion, which contribute to creating new rules of and for fashion. The fashion experts, those who understand fashion, are the yardstick with which to compare oneself when one is trained in fashion.

Furthermore, fashion is also a source of aesthetic reactions: a shorter or longer dress can cause in us an uncomfortable reaction that can be expressed through a sign of disapproval (verbal or non-verbal), as well as through reactions of appreciation (cf. Wittgenstein 1967, 1:13). In our everydayness, the frequent use of a garment denotes the pleasure one feels towards it. In this sense, the use of a garment can express both the meaning of a dress in a certain context and the pleasure we feel for certain garments. Furthermore, we can express in fashion aesthetic judgments based on aesthetic criteria of correctness. In fact, when we make an aesthetic judgment in fashion, we refer to a set of more or less evident rules, indicating the correctness (or not) of certain items of clothing or accessories. But how do we know when a fashion's match is aesthetically correct or wrong?

Here, close to the aesthetic concept of correctness, we encounter another central Wittgensteinian notion, namely the notion of "clicking." A "click" might be configured as a perception of correctness that takes place when something has occurred (e. g.: a clock whose hands reach a perfectly symmetrical position). In fact, since the rules of fashion are conceptually difficult to grasp, the parameter of fashion-related judgments would also be difficult to understand if the "clicking" did not

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[2] Expressions such as "I love your skirt" or "This jacket suits you better than that one" or "This colour doesn't suit you" might be a reference to linguistic training.

[3] Sensitivity to the grammar of dressing is shown in our ability to discern which garment is best for each occasion. Once one acquires sensitivity to the rules and context, one will be more competent in giving fashion judgments, which are expressed with advice and suggestions.

come into play: it is nothing more than a last proof of the correct way to follow a certain rule.

There are, however, some problems with this aesthetic paradigm of fashion. The main one is that, on this account, the set of rules to which we appeal daily in dressing, and with which we express aesthetic judgments, are almost never explicit and clear. It is very difficult to draw up an exhaustive list of rules according to which to dress in everyday life and that may provide us with a stable criterion of aesthetic judgment, since understanding and describing the rules that govern fashion is almost as difficult as defining the use of expressions of aesthetic judgment. To have a chance to succeed in understanding aesthetic judgements, one needs to be familiar with the kind of aesthetic rules that govern fashion.

One solution to this problem could be to look at our analogy with language games: dressing up in fashion or dressing for a specific occasion is nothing more than engaging in different language games. Only by playing one game rather than another is it possible to understand the rules that guide it. In the same way, it is therefore possible to understand the rules and aesthetic reactions that guide fashion. In fact, the correctness of a certain dress for a given context only emerges when two people play the same aesthetic language game and can therefore assess what is right or wrong in clothing. By sharing the same language game of fashion, it is possible to grasp the rules that govern it, therefore attaining an ever more refined understanding of how to dress properly on a given type of occasion.

5 Conclusion

To conclude, considering what we have discussed so far, it seems that the combination of Wittgenstein's aesthetic-linguistic paradigm with fashion can work. As a matter of fact, the meaning of a dress can change depending on the context; the rules that fashion follows are not eternal, and therefore reconcile with the properties of cyclicality and the ephemeral being of fashion. Thus, the meaning of a dress will also change as the rules concerning how to dress change. This set of rules constitutes a grammar proper to fashion, or a "grammar of dressing." Further, the practice of following a rule is consolidated thanks to a mimetic training through which it is possible to acquire sensitivity to the rules, and thereby to become experts with respect to the rule. Since these rules are not eternal, it is also possible to modify some of them,

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giving space to the need for differentiation and expression of one's identity, while at the same time not disregarding criteria of correctness or incorrectness concerning the way of dressing. We can therefore say that fashion is a constellation of aesthetic language games – interpreted as sets of linguistic and cultural practices that constantly intertwine, which form an aesthetic language with a grammar of its own.

Finally, a form of life organizes the set of human practices in cultural and historical communities, and fashion could be one of these historical and cultural practices, though it structures or organizes itself according to its own, time-bound aesthetic rules. In this sense, fashion could be called an "aesthetic form of life." An aesthetic form of life acts as a shared horizon in which mutual understanding is possible and in which a sense of belonging to a sociocultural community is formed. In the same way, fashion as an aesthetic form of life draws horizons of taste shared by the community, in which to recognize oneself aesthetically, creating a common aesthetic sense in which to move in the daily contexts of life.

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