FASHIONING THE SELF IN PRE-MODERN AND POST-MODERN SOCIETY

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Abstract: Fashion scholars have often examined material culture and consumption habits in pre-modern society or in post-modern one. However a comparative study between the two epochs has not been established yet. In fact the role of the appearance in court society and in contemporary lifestyle, as it is displayed on social media, reveals interesting similarities that need to be illustrated. Social life at the French court centred on the visible, more particularly on a constructed image of the self where every gesture, apparel or behaviour were well documented by the prestigious nobility. Contemporary living is characterized by the central role of social media in diffusing information and fashionable styles. Facebook has become a sociable activity in daily life where any kind of news and reports of latest purchase are shared and observed by the rest of the network. In both pre-modern and post-modern lifestyle, I argue, there is need of observing the appearance of other members of the social group as much as being the centre of observation. Could Facebook, as a display window of our lifestyle and fashion practices, be the post-modern invention of the pre-modern court?

Keywords: appearance, observation, lifestyle, fashion, identity

1. Introduction

Fashion history is nourished by the consideration of the French court as a space of luxury display. Being the mirror of royal splendour, this centre of social prestige and power was the core of extravagant consumption habits. The court as institution can be considered as both public and private: its public character would allow the respect and the admiration of the masses while its private part would constantly reinforce the unattainable world it represented. Its mission of dignity and grandness had to be sustained by rituals of luxury consumption wherein an ideal of glory could stay intact.

Fashion as a changing material culture has made its long journey from the elite circles to the plebeian ones. There was a time when certain materials were allotted differently according to the stratum of the user. The social life centred on the visible and more particularly on a constructed image of the self that could be appropriate within the court milieu. Any gesture, costume or behaviour at the court was well documented by the prestigious spectators, servers of the king himself. In reality, the whole life of the court was a spectacle where every actor was trained to follow the dominating etiquette. Living a continuous play in a splendid luxurious theatre – the château - could perhaps look as a prominent task. We should not forget that the aristocracy enjoyed extraordinary privileges as land ownership, allocations, considerable positions within the military and the clergy and other important political appointments. The sociologist Norbert Elias reminds us that earning money “had a low place in the values of court strata of pre-industrial societies” (Elias, 2006, p. 80) and therefore the king’s support was capital for the courtiers. This politics of ruling and living rested on the major role of the appearance as a daily recurrent element in
courtly life. In this study, the notion of appearance is used to imply the manners that together with the apparel represent the individual and whereby the communication with the group takes place. The appearance is what one chooses to display to his surroundings so as to be accepted in or recognized by a certain social group. It is the identity that one aspires to have, demonstrating hence one’s values in life. The appearance can equally be understood as a “presence”, as being part of a context or situation and I will illustrate this particular dimension later on.

This significance of the appearance could fully embrace the concept of fashion itself. However, today’s use of the latter tends to be slightly narrow since it is often limited to indicate the latest trends, clothing and accessories. This can be put in opposition to the wide meaning that pre-modern society saw in fashion, namely as a whole lifestyle which gives an interesting and prolific connotation for this study. The historian Roche notes in this connection that “[i]n the reigns of Louis XIII and Louis XIV, the notion of fashion had two meanings: on the one hand, custom, styles of life, ways of doing things, a conformism of practices; on the other, whatever changed according to time and place” (Roche, 1994, p. 47). In pre-modern era, one’s rank imposed a duty of luxury consumption and the conformity to the King’s etiquette.¹ But above all, it is the organization of a network that is a striking element in Ancien Régime France. This network was built up on regulations where luxury living and enormous expenditures constituted the entry gate to it. If we consider the fact that about 10,000 people were living at the Château de Versailles in 1744 (Elias, 2006, p. 89), we might better understand the world of intrigues that this dwelling must have been. From the reign of Louis XIV until the one of Louis XVI none of the solid etiquette routine had changed. Madame Campan, the first lady-in-waiting to Marie-Antoinette confirms this fact in her highly fascinating memoirs where she writes about the absence of happiness at Versailles since “[t]he source of esprit and enlightenment was in Paris” (Madame Campan, 1988, p. 22).

Elias speaks about the “the art of observing people” when attempting to understand this courtly structure: “the individual is always observed in court society in his social context, as a person in relation to others” (Elias, 2006, p. 114). This interesting assumption will be the starting point of this study where the role of appearance in courtiers’ daily life will be examined in the first part.

Moving forward in time we can conclude that the process of civilization that made its entry in the eighteenth century has continuously changed social and political conditions in western societies. Visiting the salons and the cafés and even attending exhibitions became important social activities during the enlightenment. These customs paved the way for critical observations and the emergence of political and aesthetic principles that raised the idea of modern art criticism. Moreover the literary salons in the eighteenth century became one of the most powerful social activities that affected many aspects of both French and foreign societies. Salon culture contributed notably to the promotion of ideologies regarding human conditions and civilization. This vision was illustrated in the enlightenment project aiming primarily at the education of people and the interest in foreign societies and lifestyles. The right to comfort, formerly limited to court and elite circles was now actively debated by philosophers and economists. The economic growth of the middle-class and its increasing possession of important political and administrative positions opened up for future power shift. Moreover, the variety of goods and their availability undermined eventually social hierarchies and the demand for luxury commodities had an impact on both economic growth and socio-cultural debates. The attitude to consumption in the eighteenth century became of concern for the public who was taking part in the discussions on culture, commerce and economic welfare. And the fact that luxury was intensely contested at the time shows the interesting transition from the ancient world to the modern one. This development is a result of the

¹ The daily procedure of ceremonies in Louis XIV’s bedroom is well known by now and manifests the importance of rank distinction and privileges in the court structure.
"civilizing process" 2 that included a mixture of idealism and materialism. Helped by the French revolution, this process challenged eventually the privileges of inherited social values. And ever since the nineteenth century, the progress of materialism has been the engine of daily life. Likewise, consumption debates are still abundant, comprising moral and political arguments. The democratization of luxury that came with the industrialization and the establishment of department stores in the nineteenth century is today a reality for a large part of the western population. Aristocratic consumption habits have been expanded to the masses. In particular, the technical development has opened up for the access to vast information channels and to new means of interaction. When earlier communication was aimed to stay in every proper social stratum, the present one is extended to different groups.

Social media can be considered today as a major actor behind our use and dissemination of all kind of information. The letters that became a popular genre in the eighteenth century is now replaced by a quick response technique like Facebook, not to mention the e-mail. Facebook, our concern in this part of the analysis, can be used in many ways 3 but mainly as a communication channel that includes professional networks as well as contacts with relatives and friends. The most interesting characteristic of this site – in conformity with many other social media sites – is the easy access and the interaction it offers to its members. Furthermore, the constant reports about one’s activities, food habits, work, travels, children’s doings and success, husband and wife’s achievements constitute information that is particularly representative and interesting for the aim of this study. 4

The idea of Facebook was launched in February 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg, Eduardo Saverin, Dustin Mokovitz, Chris Hughes and Andrew McCollum. In an interview from October 14, 2010, Zuckerberg confirms the original idea behind Facebook: “Everyone has an identity that they want to express and friends and family that they wanna stay connected with” (Zuckerberg, 2010). Networking is a basic human behaviour since we all need to socialize and to link up to different groups that can confirm our needs and interests. To be exact, we need to observe the others as much as we need to be observed by them. The difference in social behaviour and lifestyle, I argue, between pre-modern society and post-modern one is perhaps not so big as we first might think. It is therefore pertinent to examine courtly consumption rituals and contemporary ones. What is the function of displaying one’s lifestyle and observing the other’s? And what role does the appearance play in the formation of the identity?

1.1 Noble appearance

In Louis XIII’s letter of declaration of the sumptuary laws from 1634, it is made clear how the abuse of luxury consumption had caused an “inconvenience” for the rich and for the others who “sometimes are compelled to obtain [the Apparel] by wicked means for to uphold so great and vaine an [sic] expence” (Louis XIII, 1634, p.2). The royal declaration contains a precise description of the forbidden items to wear like “Belts, Girdles, Swordhangers, Hatbands, Points, Garters, Scarfs, Knots, and Ribbands, any woolen or linen Clothes of Gold or Silver, true or counterfeit, Tinfell, Embroideries of Pearles or precious stones, stones, gold or silver buttons of Goldsmithes worke” (Louis XIII, 1634, pp. 3-4). These regulations represented the monarchy’s prevention of all kind of mimesis and mixture of social ranks. The historian

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2 “Civilizing Process” is the term used by Elias (1982) to describe the evolution of social manners associated with changes in consumption.

3 I am not minimizing other interesting aspects of Facebook when it is used for instance as political information or propaganda. In this context, it can also be argued whether our use of social media should be considered as a sufficient act of engagement per se, able to replace our physical engagement. However, this aspect would deviate from the aim of this study and will therefore be left out of the analysis.

4 My observation of Facebook activities is based on the appearance of Swedish users.
Fernand Braudel reminds us that "[S]ubject to incessant change, costume everywhere is a persistent reminder of social position. The sumptuary laws were therefore an expression of the wisdom of governments – but even more of the resentment of the upper classes when they saw the nouveaux riches imitate them" (Braudel, 1988, p. 311).

It is in such context that we realise the body of meanings related to the object and this is where symbols find their territory. Symbols enable us to understand human communication and, in this case, how the use of objects refers to the idea that one has of the world. By looking at the relationship between the subject and the object, we may be able to understand the role of material culture in western society. The monarchy’s purpose in the Ancien Régime was to obstruct new social habits where luxury could be expanded to lower social groups. As a way of preventing a current of equality, the monarchy had to restrict the use of ornaments and lavish material, keeping hence the control over the nobility and its apparel. This objective was to be achieved though the object and more particularly through the clothing which becomes a means of integration and separation. Since the dress constituted a major component of the court’s splendour and etiquette, its meaning and use were central. This etiquette according to Elias was for the king “an instrument not only of distancing but of power” (Elias, 2006, p. 127). Social barriers were essential for the preservation of power and, consequently, of the royal structure of dependency. And it is in this precise context that courtly networks have to be seen.⁵

The quest for prestige and power required from early modern society to be fully enmeshed in the culture of appearance. We can read about it in the Parisian bourgeois Jean de La Bruyère’s book Characters from 1688:

A man who knows the ways of the Court is master of his gestures, his eyes and his face; he is deep, impenetrable; he pretends not to notice injuries done him, he smiles to his enemies, controls his temper, disguises his passions, belies his heart, speaks and acts against his real opinions. All this elaborate procedure is merely a vice which we call deceitfulness, which is sometimes as useless to the courtier for his advancement as frankness, sincerity and virtue would have been (La Bruyère, 2011, 8:2).

This picture given by the observer La Bruyère reveals not only the importance of a correct image at the court but in fact, the only way to be at the court. Courtly daily life was truly nothing else but exact positions that had to be taken in order to obtain the esteem of the others. Here we need to note the importance of honour and respect in court society. Respect was essential if one wanted to maintain his rank: “Anyone who cannot maintain an appearance befitting his rank loses the respect of his society. In the incessant race for status and prestige he falls behind his rivals and runs the risk of being both ruined and eliminated from the social life of his status group” (Elias, 2006, p. 74). Therefore, the appearance required an appropriate consumption that would reinforce the social image. The display of one’s positions and lifestyle took place in a constant relationship to the group who, consequently, constituted the mirror in which the courtiers would find their identity. It is in this perspective that the others could cause the rise and fall of the being and it is in such circumstances that one can conceive the well structured interdependency system at the French court. Hippolyte Taine in his large history study of the Ancien Régime notes that the presence at the court was fundamental to the aristocracy that even a provincial governor needed to appear at the court if he wanted to have a carrier. The administrative machinery of Louis XIV claimed that one had to be seen in the king’s salon if one needed any favour. Being rejected to the provinces by the king was regarded as a disgrace and humiliation due to the lack of social life outside the court circle (Taine, 1986, pp. 78-80).

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⁵ The grandeur of the French court was at its highest point during the reign of Louis XIV (1638-1715) and more exactly after 1660. Erich Auerbach states that “Court influence did not become predominant until after 1660, when Mazarin was dead and Louis XIV had begun to rule in his own right” (Auerbach, 1984, p. 139).
This social atmosphere imposed a considerable amount of expenditure and offices that would allow to the privileged members to be part of the court spectacle. The monarchy had 198 persons working for the personal service of the king: there was somebody to hold his coat, his stick, to comb his hair, to dry him after the bath, to tie up his cravat and to remove and bring back his hollowed chair (Taine, 1986, p. 147). Moreover, Louis XV spent 36 million of francs on Madame de Pompadour and in 1751 he had 4000 horses in his stables and it seems that only his house cost 68 million that year (Taine, 1986, p. 132). Bearing this in mind we can easily understand the need to adjust the appearance to the internal regulations of the court. La Bruyère notes that “[a] nobleman who lives at home in the country is free, but unsupported; if he lives at Court he is protected, but a slave: which makes things even” (La Bruyère, 2011, 8:67). This slavery was the price one had to pay in order to partake in this privileged social network. And we know that many nobles were ruined in their search for acceptance. The costs of equipment, livery and domestics could exceed one’s budget and in such deplorable circumstances the social image was jeopardized. One’s decorative image was a vital element in life and any loss of this decoration would bring down the status and respect. Erich Auerbach in his study of the court and the city claims that “[t]he nobility is a class without a function, yet recognized as a privileged class and to all outward appearance occupying a position of real power” (Auerbach, 1984, p. 167). In fact, this statement is slightly rough since bearing the grandeur of the monarchy was an important function per se. The courtiers constituted the necessary ornament of the royal building where their appearance reflected the royal power and the honour of social heritage. Such structure implied a courtly politics that reposed on mutual dependency: while the king supported his subjects as a way of obtaining their protection, the nobility had to pay its duty in exchange for the king’s benefits. This court system created many competitive activities supported by the constant act of observation of one another. Madame de Sévigné’s (1626-1696) many letters reveal interesting aspects of the French social climate during the second half of the seventeenth century. One of her letters tells about a fire that burst out at the court during the night:

What portraits could not have been painted of the state we were all in? Guitaut was in his nightshirt, with some breeches on. Mme de Guitaut was bare-legged and had lost one of her bedroom slippers. Mme de Vauvireux was in her petticoat with no dressing-gown. All the servants and neighbours had nightcaps on. The Ambassador, in dressing-gown and wig, maintained perfectly the dignity of a Serene Highness (Cited in Wilson, 2007, p. 6).

It is quite remarkable that, despite the fire, Mme de Sévigné was fully capable to observe the apparel of the other fire escaping court people. This event can be read as an anecdote but on a deeper plan reveals the fully ingrained observing character of the courtiers. In order to understand this need of observation, we need to clarify that positions within the court hierarchy were unstable since the king could take back as much as he would give. Elias states that “Within the court mechanism, one person’s desire for status kept others vigilant. And once a stable balance of privileges had emerged, no one could break out without encroaching upon these privileges, the basis of their whole personal and social existence” (Elias, 2006, p. 96). The permanent quest for recognition and prestige was the dominant element in courtly networks and this quest claimed the observation of the others so as one could maintain or modify one’s status within the network. As representatives of the social position, the dress and behaviour become hence the ultimate means of confirmation of one’s status. Once again, the observer La Bruyère reveals the performance of this society entrapped in the power of exterior expressions. In his reflections about the city, he describes the frivolous attitude of the Parisian population only concerned about the appearance. Meeting each other becomes a spectacle that needs a public and a mutual judgment:

On a public promenade people wait to see one another pass; they file past for mutual inspection: carriages, horses, liveries, coats of arms, nothing escapes observation, [...] and according to the size of the equipage, the owner is either respected or despised been (La Bruyère, 2011, 7:1).
In another paragraph, the author uses the metaphor of “theatre” in the French original version to illustrate the artificial attitude of Parisian women: “in crowded places, where women forgather to show off fine materials and to reap the fruit of their toilette, they walk in pairs not for the sake of conversation, but to seek mutual support on the stage, to acquire familiarity with their audience and strength to resist their critics” (La Bruyère, 2011, 7:3). Reading La Bruyère shows that the act of observation was characteristic for Parisian city life as well.

Undoubtedly, this need of inspection of the others described above was not the major concern of the populace who could not meet the expenses of material comfort. Neither was it question of the courtiers since they had their own social arena to play on. The target of criticism in this satirical depiction was Parisian bourgeois women who were aping the court attitude, “[t]he silliness of certain town ladies, which makes them attempt to imitate those of the court, is something worse than the coarseness of working women or the rusticity of peasants”, writes again La Bruyère (2011, 7:16). This reflection of a contemporary observer reveals two things: on the one hand, the traditional act of imitation that explains how fashion is reproduced by the lower classes, and on the other hand it gives an indication of a bourgeois consumption activity taking place in Paris. Dress studies have frequently been the concern of economic and social history with a concentration on the production. And within fashion studies, historians have willingly related middle-class consumer habits to nineteenth century’s industrialization process. However, the abundant studies of Roche show that fashion consumption has a much longer history that the one connected to modernity since “consumption was a reality well before the industrial and commercial revolution that began in the eighteenth century” (Roche, 1996, p. 16). This statement can be confirmed in La Bryère who describes the consumption of the middle-class and its reproduction of the nobility’s behaviour. We have seen earlier how court people had to adjust their appearance to the royal regulations; but what we see in addition is that the middle-class was also aspiring to a status confirmation on the social arena. In other words, court society had its correspondent in town, although the structure was different. While the courtiers had to be approved by the king, the bourgeois needed the admiration of their equals or, even better, of the nobles and the courtiers. Monsieur Jourdain in Molière’s Le bougeois gentilhomme from 1670 illustrates the desperate attempts of a bourgeois man to imitate the distinguished aristocratic world. In the second scene, Monsieur Jourdain explains to his music teacher that he was late because he had to dress for the occasion like “les gens de qualité” and that his tailor had sent him stockings in silk, which was a great luxury at the time. He is very keen on showing his new livery to the present teachers (Molière, 1963, pp. 28-29) as much as he is in engaging different people so as to learn how to play music, dance, converse, fight and bow to a marquise. Molière satirizes here the ridiculous anxiety of the middle-class to duplicate the manners and the apparel of the nobility.

These were the social conditions that characterised the appearance of pre-modern society. It is time now to see how contemporary society displays its lifestyle through social media.

1.2 Facebook appearance

A global study led by the International Centre for Media and the Public Agenda at the University of Maryland aimed to understand how college students use media and how they would react when being unplugged for 24 hours (The world unplugged, September 2010). Unsurprisingly, the results confirmed the

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high grade of human addiction to social media and how the state of being unplugged becomes a social and nearly a personal torture.

Many of the details displayed on Facebook used to be earlier of an intimate concern or the kind of information reserved for a close group of people. This net-based activity, I argue, has succeeded the earlier concept of the salon as a meeting-place for sociability. The physical meetings of the salon implied themes of pleasure, the art of conversation and social debates and in that could join the idea of the sociable Facebook. However, a major difference can be discerned since salons visitors consisted of a well chosen company of bourgeois, nobles and intellectuals while Facebook can regroup any kind of acquaintance, either near or far. More particularly the intimacy of the salon atmosphere could not be claimed on the web due to the large extent of the network and the absence of physical meetings. However, I argue that the most remarkable aspect of Facebook is this phenomenon of the cult of the self where members dedicate their time to expose self-centred activities.

As mentioned earlier, Facebook is characterized by abundant information about daily life, revealing descriptions of personal habits, successful children playing golf or receiving awards, progressions in work and so on. In fact, Facebook has become the diary of many users, but when diaries with intimate reflections were basically aimed to stay in one’s possession, Facebook is aimed to display them. There is henceforth a visible need of sharing one’s least experience with others. Or is it the awareness of the other’s presence that creates a need of publicity? Is it by observing the other’s appearance that makes people realize their own role within the social network? The global media study mentioned above confirms this statement: “[S]tudents reported that how they use media shapes how others think of them and how they think about themselves” and a student from Hong Kong stated that “[T]here is no doubt that Facebook is really high profile in our daily life. Everybody use it to contact other persons, also we use it to pay attention to others” (The world unplugged, September 2010).

We have seen previously the role of the appearance in pre-modern society and how one’s behaviour and lifestyle were in constant connection to the ones of the group. I have also noted the importance of being seen at the court in order to be part of the social system. This display of the self to the others had to be correct and well incorporated in the values established by the king and followed by the courtiers. However, the development of the civilizing process has ever since the eighteenth century allowed the public expression of different social groups and our contemporary society has truly reached the culmination of the free word. There are indeed endless possibilities for every one to display personal views and opinions. Blogs constitute another example of this tendency. While fashion used to be dictated by higher social groups to lower ones, blogs and Facebook offer today numerous chances to initiate and share taste and consumption habits. This development reveals the increased interest in being engaged and observed for this engagement. It also shows that Internet users have become addictive of each other’s activities and doings. In fact, pre-modern court society, as a system of interdependence, is recreated in our contemporary time although the regulations that dictated the entrance to higher social groups are no longer crucial. That said, the appearance is still elementary since our lifestyle is well

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7 This development from salon culture toward social media is a result of the enlargement of the public sphere. My argument is that the sophisticated salon milieu has become a common website where all kind of people can express their opinions.

8 The cult of the self or Le culte du moi in French is the expression used to describe the literary tendencies between 1800 and 1820. Great romantic authors like Chateaubriand, Goethe, Madame de Staël and Benjamin Constant demonstrated an affirmation of the individuality in contrast to the classical values that denied the elaboration of the self. The representation of this cult showed dissatisfaction, frustration and ennui. Chateaubriand called the tensions of his age for “le mal du siècle”. These currents created the romantic movement of the first half of the nineteenth century.
documented by the others on social media. We can comment each other's status or our own and we can clearly read about the happiness and pride of a “friend's” latest purchase of a new car or a kitchen. A young blogger in Sweden, twenty-year old Kissie, stated the following in an interview: “When you live for each other’s eyes, it is clear that you feel the press. Life becomes more exposed. And when you read all the time about other’s success, it is easy to think that you are not where you should be. All the bloggers look fantastic already by breakfast. The fact that they get up one hour earlier to fix themselves for a good morning photo, that is not displayed” (Åkerberg, 2011, p. 26).

If the court milieu can be seen as a spectacle where every actor/courtier had his role in it, our net-based activities can perhaps be considered as its post-modern equivalent. In effect, our customs, practices and lifestyle need to be confirmed by the others so as to acquire meanings. It is interesting to note in this connection the idea of the philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre about the self being obsessed by the judgment of others. In his philosophy, the gaze of the other can either save the person or condemn him like in the theme of the play Huis clos from 1944. The meaning “L’enfer, c’est les Autres” or “Hell is other People” at the end of the play resumes the impossibility for the human being to liberate himself from his fellow beings. This could be a dark thought to live with but is quite appealing if we want to understand the motive of our behavior. It is worthy at this point of the discussion to consider the nature of our social role, identity and the objects that surround us. Would they acquire meaning on their own or merely through the observation and the confirmation of the others?

Undoubtedly, golf training keeps us in shape, successful carrier gives us satisfaction, beautiful kitchen provides a pleasant feeling to the owner, perhaps even happiness and trips to far-away and exotic destinations constitute an exciting project for the traveller. However, we need to distinguish between personal utility and social meaning. The personal utility of golf is good physical condition and pleasure, a flourishing carrier provides money, the kitchen is useful and trips make us discover other cultures. But if we want these activities and objects to acquire social meaning, we need to expose them to the world so as they can be observed by the others. “Many students across the globe reported in their reflections that without access to Facebook they feel cut off, isolated and disconnected from friends, families and life in general” says the global media study (The world unplugged, September 2010). In effect, it is the other's gaze on my lifestyle that gives it meaning. This suggestion can indeed be applied to the nature of fashion itself. The dress considered exclusively as materiality cannot constitute anything else but a cover for the body or a beautiful artefact. Its meaning arises first from the social context that surrounds it. That is also to say that not until the dress is observed by others that it becomes part of a cultural, political and economic discourse. Hence, the act of observation has to take place in order to comprehend the intricate meaning of fashion.

In Alexander McQueen’s show from Spring-Summer 2001 the public had to sit and watch themselves in a large mirror while waiting for the spectacle to start. Caroline Evans comments McQueen's genius move as if he “reduced the observers to objects, turning their own sharp scrutiny of the models back on themselves, highlighting how much the model, as well as the clothes, are objectified in the gaze of the journalists, recalling Lukács's and Marx’s descriptions of commodity fetishism whereby people live out their relations to each other via objects, displacing human emotions onto things, flooding them with meaning” (Evans, 2003, p. 94). This example illustrates how human communication reduces its channels to the observation of the objects of the subject where the first become the identity of the latter.

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9 It is noteworthy that the objects announced on the popular sell and buy site in Sweden “Blocket” can be connected to Facebook where your “friends” can see what you are interested of or what you just invested in.

10 This obsession of the other is also present in Sartre's autobiography Les Mots. The scene in the bathroom where the little child feels the gaze of God and gets disturbed by it shows Sartre's effort to be released from the verdict of the other (Sartre, 1964, pp. 88-89).
Moreover when I discussed the court society, I referred to honour and respect as important components in the lifestyle of higher classes. I would like to maintain that particularly the respect still plays an important role in contemporary society. However, it seems like this idea of respect has come to be replaced by the confirmation of the others on Facebook. An interview with a twenty-year-old young man in the Swedish daily paper Svenska Dagbladet tells about how the addiction to social media becomes round the clock preoccupation. The interviewed young man reveals the importance of being confirmed by the others, even for small details in life: “It becomes like a contest to get as many confirmations as possible on everything you do. If you are to tell that you drink coffee you have to do it the smart way so as to get fifty confirmations, but if barely nobody reacts it would not feel good at all” (Ennart, 2012, p.8).

The need of post-modern society to exhibit itself on the virtual world can join the pre-modern criteria of respect. One’s objects displayed on Facebook, one’s personal affairs, lifestyle or one’s family reflect all the insatiable and timeless hunger for confirmation or respect. In fact, obtaining the respect of others could legitimate one’s identity and social status that, in our time, have moved from court circles to public social media sites.

1.2.1 Social media as the future of fashion?

In pre-modern time, courtiers and wealthy Parisian bourgeois were enmeshed in the culture of appearance imposed by the social rank. To get an access to and maintain one’s position within this prestigious society, the courtiers had to be present in their circles and follow the social regulations of a fashionable appearance and lifestyle. In their quest for respect and status, Parisian bourgeois imitated the aristocratic appearance by seeking the confirmation of their equals or even of those of higher social rank.

The confines of this distinguished sphere have eventually faded away for the benefit of a public realm displayed on different social media sites. Facebook represents an interesting example of post-modern behaviour where the appearance, as the one in court circles, plays a major role in creating an identity. By observing the appearance of others on Facebook, we can position our own social role. The objects that we present, the detailed descriptions of our choices and activities and the lifestyle that we display are all public property able to confirm our status. From being restrained to well chosen social stratum, our activities have now reached a large extent of spectators. The constant progress of technology has reinforced the range of the public sphere and our possibilities of observing the others as much as being the subject of observation. Our appearance on Facebook, as much as on other social media channels, indicates our need to be major actors in the virtual network where our daily life and the objects that surround us acquire social meaning. Previously, social life implied physical meetings within a specific group like the court society or the salon. Henceforth, a web-based interactivity has come to replace the physical gathering but in reality, without eliminating any of our skills in observing one another. Our post-modern society has to maintain its appearance just as pre-modern one had to do. In fact, “the incessant race for status and prestige” has never ceased. Could Facebook be considered as the post-modern invention of the pre-modern court society? Just as the rejection to the provinces in the past symbolized disgrace and boredom, our disappearance from social media would today represent an exile. The respect that used to be earlier a major element in social life has hereafter been replaced by status confirmations on Facebook. We have now found a new arena where we can liberally fashion ourselves, helped by the gaze of others.
References


