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Patrik Aspers and Lise Skov
Current Sociology 2006 54: 802
DOI: 10.1177/0011392106066817

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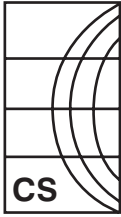
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Encounters in the Global Fashion Business

Afterword

Patrik Aspers

Max Planck Institute for the Studies of Societies

Lise Skov

Copenhagen Business School

This issue of *Current Sociology* explores the relationship between fashion as a cultural form and fashion as business through five articles by scholars who have done extensive research on the fashion business. The question that underlies the articles concerns the connection between production and consumption of fashion. What is the relationship between them? How can they be studied without marginalizing one or the other? The articles capture in rich detail the way in which fashion is actually produced these days, and their answers are supported by empirical evidence. They offer a clear description of processes within the seemingly tumultuous fashion industry.

The global fashion business is a large and diverse sector that comprises traditional manufacturing industry as well as creative sectors typical of the New Economy. The fashion business has long been a leader in industrial outsourcing, and new global peripheries of labour-intensive manufacturing change almost as rapidly as fashion itself. The same can be said about the volatile relationship between technologies, materials, manufacturing, design, branding, marketing and consumption.¹ One implication of the fact that the fashion business is both a creative sector and an old-fashioned manufacturing industry is that professionals are required to make both ends of the value chain, i.e. production and consumption, hang together. This is the task of the middle managers, who know how to set up a factory in a developing country, of the buyers, who make decisions about the coming season's collection, as well as designers working for manufacturers who use their knowledge of fashion to mediate between overseas buyers' requirements and the abilities of the local factories and workforce.

Against a backdrop of constant change, the empirical contribution of this issue of the journal must be stressed. The articles are based on ethnographic studies of fashion people and fashion relationships: buyers in an upmarket London department store, editorial staff of international fashion magazines in Paris, London, New York, Tokyo and Hong Kong, fashion designers in Sweden, the UK, Turkey and India, fashion photographers in Stockholm and New York City, fashion weeks and other trade fairs in China, Hong Kong and Europe, and subcultural youth and niche department stores in Tokyo.

While we feel that it is a merit that the issue covers so many aspects of the value system – from retailing to garment design and textile fairs by way of media and advertising – and so many geographical locations, we are aware that this also presents a limitation. How can ethnographic studies of an industry as large, complex and volatile as the global fashion business not end up as impressionistic mosaic? In this issue we have given priority to the in-depth understanding of the micro-level over the systematic modelling of the whole. This is the most productive research strategy given the limited knowledge we have of this industry. But to further balance this we wish to draw the disparate theoretical and empirical threads together in this Afterword in order to give directions for further research in this field.

Each article maps and analyses a particular setting within the fashion business. Focus is not on professional groups or individual firms, but on how fashion is actually produced through extensive production networks. The focus in all studies is on relationships between different actors and institutions. This special issue is titled '*Encounters in the Global Fashion Business*' in order to focus on this intersubjective nature of fashion production.

Encounters take place on a small scale – an example discussed by Entwistle is a buyer inspecting samples in a showroom with her budget in mind – or on a large scale – for example when thousands of fashion people come together for fashion week as analysed by Skov. What characterizes this conception of encounters is that they facilitate a multidirectional exchange. People may shape things, but there is also a distinct possibility that things shape people. The concept of encounters shifts focus away from individuals and entities and allows us to zoom in on interaction, negotiation and mediation between people and products, buyers and vendors, but also between different professions and different nationalities, and ultimately also between economy and aesthetics.

Figure 1 illustrates the many different actors in this industry. What is highlighted, however, are the different actors that are crucial parts of stabilizing fashion, and taking part in the process of collectively determining fashion(s). Fashion fairs, trend analysts, design schools – who

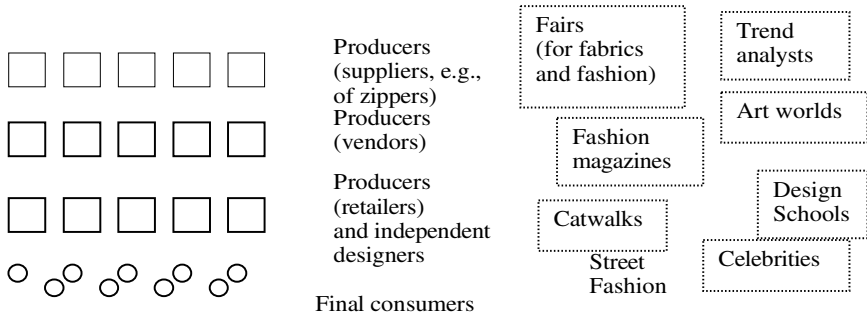


Figure 1 *Markets, Actors and Institutions of the Global Fashion Business*

Note: Dotted lines indicate cultural institutions. At one end of the material production chain one finds the suppliers of input material for production of garments, such as fabrics and sewing machines. Final consumers populate the other end. One may of course divide this chain into many small links; all being important in their own right, and more could of course be said about the different markets. There are yet other actors that cannot be depicted here. Finally, the boundaries can be drawn quite differently between actors and various activities.

produce partly socialized human input to the industry – and catwalks, much of which is reflected in fashion magazines, all contribute to create a more manageable cultural flow of fashion. In fact, in Figure 1 we do not show the different flows and the numerous encounters that take place in this industry; such a picture would be like a cobweb. Our argument here is that the fashion industry is a complex structure with a blend of economic, material and cultural flows, all of which ultimately are social.

All the activities of firms, and in particularly the cultural producers, such as trend analysts, fashion magazines and so on produce meaning of what fashion is, and since these actors are endowed with status in this industry, construct what we call fashion. In Figure 1, then, there is a flow of cultural production, from the right to the left. This means that the idea of collective production is not merely a notion that should be used at the micro-level. In fact, the output of this industry is a consequence of the activities of many actors, all of whom have to find out their niches and with more or less power try to impose their will on the industry. The outcome is a result that no single actors have intended; it is an unintended compromise.

How may we, then, understand the logic of fashion today? The trickle-down theory correctly points at the logic that drives the change of fashion, but it is not simply class structures, but rather the coming together of high-status producers (brand names), on the one hand, and high-status consumers (e.g. celebrities), on the other, that constitute fashion(s). The way bridges are constructed from the producer to the consumer side of

the market, via fashion garments, creates fashion when this bridging is seen on television and in fashion magazines and the like. But fashion is also determined in the streets, in clubs and by cinema and other popular culture. This means that ideas may come from many sources, and not only from the industry, though they are filtered through the market mechanisms; the supply of fashion is a result of this. We argue that it is not possible to speak of one single fashion, but rather of different fashions existing at the same time.

Creativity and the Study of Fashion

A shared assumption runs through all the five articles: creativity cannot be explained solely with reference to the individual. This point is argued explicitly by Aspers, who coins the term contextual knowledge in order to show how designers draw from different contextual spheres. He finds three such contexts to which designers relate their work: other actors in the same network, art worlds and consumer markets.

Other articles take different tacks on the same discussion by showing how the barrier between creative and humdrum personnel (as Richard Caves [2000] puts it) is broken down in reality. This is, for example, essential in Joanne Entwistle's study of fashion buyers. Buying fashion is conventionally considered to be a less creative and more commercial job than design. Yet, as Entwistle shows, buyers also make aesthetic and creative choices when they decide how to spend the season's buying budget. In addition, she describes an ongoing exchange between buyers and designers on what fashion in a particular market segment should look like. In this way, a buyer's advice about consumer tastes, for example, may well make an imprint on a designer's next collection. Another example is Moeran's study of the production of fashion magazines, which documents the ways in which magazine editors are co-producers of fashion through the ways in which they categorize and select trend themes that their magazines highlight. The work of the editor is not merely reproductive of what the famous designers have put into their collections; it is creative in the sense that it involves spotting, conceptualizing, interpreting and restaging.

This point – that creativity does not reside in the individual – corrects the conventional idea of fashion studies, namely the myth of the creative genius. At the same time, it must be said to be a point that has gained wide acceptance in the social sciences. The social contextualization of individual creativity is a typical sociological argument that runs through the sociology of art, and can be found, for example, in Howard Becker's definition of art worlds as 'Networks of people whose cooperative activity, organized via their joint knowledge of conventional means of doing

things, produces the kind of art works that the art world is noted for' (Becker, 1982: x).

If we lift Becker's concept of art worlds into the present field of study, we can say that the cooperative activities of fashion worlds include all of those who are directly involved in the production and distribution of fashion. This includes everyone from well-known designers and their hard-working assistants to factory managers and sewing machine operators. Thus many different kinds of actors are included, such as brand managers, fashion buyers and sales assistants – as well as those who play a more peripheral role – fashion design teachers, magazine editors, caterers, IT consultants and so on. Individuals are of course important in this kind of analysis, but one must remember that they become important only in interaction with others.

In this special issue we pay a lot of attention to mediators. The importance of mediators is closely related to the globalization of the fashion business. As the distance between producers and consumers increases when the value chain stretches across the globe, the fashion business provides more jobs that involve mediation of fashion. The large majority of these people, however, have never been able to acquire the status of artist. Even the Indian and Turkish fashion designers studied by Aspers fulfil a function as design technicians for commercial labels. In their capacity as mediators, however, designers, buyers, merchandisers, editors and shop assistants all do work that partly reproduces, partly alters the product through processes of selection and qualification. It is in this capacity that they are co-producers of fashion, and it is through their work we can say that fashion is directed by a series of encounters and negotiations, rather than being the expression of a particularly powerful group.

In this respect, we single out as a direction for further research the social organization of creativity, especially the organization of encounters between intermediaries whose work is partly reproductive, partly creative.

Markets and Aesthetics

The second assumption shared by all authors is that fashion, as a cultural phenomenon, should be studied in relation to fashion as business. This assumption has a double edge. On the one hand, it is directed against the tradition in fashion research of focusing exclusively on the purely social dynamics of fashion. On the other hand, it is directed at the tradition within economics and economic sociology of ignoring the nature of the product and the way in which flows of style are intertwined with economic flows. This point has also been made before, most prominently in Fine and Leopold's (1993) argument that the literature on fashion has

been ploughing two separate furrows, and has thus overlooked the critical relationship between production and consumption.

So, it is critical to document – as all the articles do – that in reality economy and aesthetics are enmeshed with one another. This is central, for example, in Skov's analysis of fashion fairs, which shows how the physical coming together of thousands of buyers and vendors in one place allows for both economic exchange and aesthetic observation and trend formation. The exact mix varies from fair to fair. But is also varies depending on the analytical approach. Another example is Yuniya Kawamura's article on subcultural fashion in Japan, which documents how young women with a strong sense of personal style may be employed as designers in spite of their lack of professional knowledge of clothes production and marketing. In both cases, the core element would have been missed if the analytical perspective had been purely economic or purely aesthetic or cultural.

Perhaps it can be argued that a study that seeks to understand the interrelation of production and consumption must be prepared to cross disciplinary boundaries (Fine, 2002; Skov, 2005). It is characteristic that the present issue of *Current Sociology*, which is by and large a sociological work in terms of content and analytical stance, written by four sociologists and one anthropologist, pulls additional material from a variety of bodies of theory including art, ritual, theatre, philosophy and film studies.

In this issue and elsewhere, Aspers and Entwistle propose a concept of aesthetic markets and aesthetic economy to characterize specific conditions in the global fashion business (see also Aspers, 2005; Entwistle, 2002). By contrast, Moeran, in his article, argues against the use of such terms on the grounds that they do not describe a separate sphere of the economy. The issue as a whole does not present a joint stance in this discussion or a generalizing concept for others to use. However, we wish to stress it as an important area for further studies and debate over concepts.

Fashion Theory and the Production of Fashion

The distinction between fashion and clothing has been central to theories of fashion. The sociological approach ultimately grounds fashion in social relations and the meaning of the objects. This means that fashion trends change, and that an object, style or activity is popular among a clique of people whom others view as having the status to set the fashion. Once a phenomenon is too common, it is no longer in fashion. By being viewed as setting fashion trends, individuals may secure their status positions, and fashion is in this way linked to social structure. Though fashion initially concerned clothes, this definition reflects the fact that analysis of

fashion can and has been done on a vast variety of social objects, and not just couture. Having said this, clothes are still central objects of analysis. The word 'fashion' refers to all kinds of changing tastes, but when used in relation to clothes, there is no need for further qualification.

One of the key issues associated with fashion theory is diffusion. The 'trickle-down' theory has been ascribed to Georg Simmel (1971) and Thorstein Veblen (1945, 1953). The main idea is that fashion emerges in the upper strata of the social system and from there it is gradually diffused to the lower strata. A consequence is that the fashion leaders of the upper strata must change the way they dress, in order to uphold the observable element of distinction.

Critique of the trickle-down theory (to whomever it is ascribed) has been a central element in fashion studies at least since Blumer (1969), who argued that the selection of fashion is a collective decision among available alternatives. In sum, Simmel's 'trickle-down' theory of fashion has step by step been replaced with a model that accounts also for bottom-up effects and for horizontal differentiation. More recent approaches have focused on the role fashion plays in the construction of personal identities. Diana Crane (2000), for example, sees this as a change from 'class' to 'consumer' fashion oriented towards distinct lifestyles within social classes. Gilles Lipovetsky (1994) adds another idea and stresses the importance of individual comfort and conceptualizes the overall change in terms of democratization of fashion.

In contrast to this discussion – in which both poles assume that fashion can be understood entirely as a logic of consumption – we turn the gaze to the production of fashion. Our argument is not merely that the workings of the value chain 'sets limits and exerts pressure' on the fashion as a cultural form. Rather, we take the key concept from fashion theory – diffusion – and turn it on the fashion business itself. Fashion consumption thus poses an important question to the study of fashion production: how does knowledge about trends and changing tastes, in short knowledge about fashion, flow through the production system? An element of emulation may be present in every single encounter in the fashion business.

The implication of this question is more than dissemination of information. We would get a quantitative overview by counting how many Chinese garment factories subscribe to the Collezione reports from the catwalk in the fashion centres. But knowledge has a deeper impact, which also involves social contact, including, for example, the learning processes that arise from long-term buyer–supplier relationships, discussed by Gary Gereffi (e.g. 2002). In short, by examining encounters in the global fashion business we are looking at the ways in which strategic knowledge is created and disseminated when fashion people get together at various points in the course of their work.

Here we point to the importance of understanding how knowledge of fashion is created and communicated in the fashion business. By taking concepts from fashion theory and applying them to the fashion business, we implicitly argue that production networks are also social scenes in which complex dynamics take place. To increase our knowledge in this field, and in the field of fashion more generally, we call for the development of theory that can emerge in relation to empirical research, but that can also drive empirical research.

Uncertainty, Change and Stability

There is a high degree of uncertainty as to how to make a success in the fashion business. This is what Richard Caves (2000) has termed the 'nobody knows' property of creative industries. Nobody knows the exact formula for a hit. There are many good products that might sell, but it is impossible to identify the one that will sell. Paul Hirsch (1972) developed a framework for how industries handle the production of goods with a high degree of uncertainty through what he called craft organization. By being able to shift alliances over the market interface, rather than reorganizing the internal operations of the firm, the firm can adapt to changes. This means that vendors of garments, agents and the like serve as retailers' buffers. These producers face an uncertainty that is hard to escape; it is not possible for vendors to push the uncertainty upstream to textile suppliers.

The problem of uncertainty, and how to create order and predictability is a problem that all economic actors face. Of course, the industry needs political stability, economic capital and the like in order to operate, but that is the same for all industries. But this problem is even more difficult in aesthetic industries, where it is not possible to transfer uncertainty into calculable alternative, i.e. to turn uncertainty into risk. In this respect, a high degree of uncertainty matches a highly fragmented industry consisting of many small firms, such as the fashion business.

However, not all ignorance in the fashion business is caused by uncertainty. Knowledge is strategically blocked at various points by larger labels, for example, in order to ensure that their Chinese suppliers are incapable of reproducing its entire line. In order to cut out competitors or to prevent suppliers from taking over the buyer's own market, fashion buying is often shrouded in secrecy.

The big irony is, however, that whereas everyone else associates fashion with change, fashion people, like all economic actors, tend to appreciate stability. Given the uncertainty associated with the fashion, the fast overlapping production cycles, the fragmentation of the industry, its fierce

competition, it is hardly surprising that one of the key concerns within the fashion business is stability.

The foundation of stability in this industry, as well as in most others, is that actors in the different markets hold identities in the markets in which they operate (see White, 2002; Aspers, 2005). In this respect, as Skov shows in the present issue, fashion week and other trade fairs enact the otherwise abstract market structure in a manner that has a largely reproductive function. Yet, stability is also a key element in the other articles as they describe work routines of buyers, designers and editors, anchored in fashion seasons. They show the importance of experience in identifying problems and solutions, and even in spotting what is new. Even ideas for new products are generated through relatively standardized sources; all fashion people look to the collections, to *Première Vision* and so on.

The article that stands out in this respect is Kawamura's study of Japanese teens. The fast-changing tastes of consumers are matched only by the cleverness of the department store that identifies trendsetters among young consumers and feeds their knowledge into the production cycle. Yet also in this case, it is the system that processes the trends that is so standardized that the young consumer-designers need no formal skills, nor even understanding, of clothes production or marketing in order to do their job.

Appendix 1 *Leading exporters and importers of clothing (Billion USD), WTO 2004*

WTO Table IV. 82	Value 2004	Share in world exports/imports				Annual percentage change			
		1980	1990	2000	2004	2000–04	2002	2003	2004
Exporters									
European Union (25)	74.92	–	–	27.0	29.0	9	6	18	9
extra-EU (25) exports	19.13	–	–	6.9	7.4	9	4	13	11
China a	61.86	4.0	8.9	18.3	24.0	14	13	26	19
Hong Kong, China	25.10	–	–	–	–	1	–4	3	8
domestic exports	8.14	11.5	8.6	5.0	3.2	–5	–10	–2	–1
re-exports	16.96	–	–	–	–	4	–1	6	13
Turkey	11.19	0.3	3.1	3.3	4.3	14	21	24	12
Mexico a, b	7.20	0.0	0.5	4.4	2.8	–4	–3	–5	–2
India c	6.62	1.7	2.3	3.1	2.8	7	10	10	...
United States	5.06	3.1	2.4	4.4	2.0	–12	–14	–8	–9
Romania	4.72	...	0.3	1.2	1.8	19	17	25	16
Indonesia	4.45	0.2	1.5	2.4	1.7	–2	–13	4	8
Bangladesh	4.44	0.0	0.6	2.0	1.7	3	–7	13	0
Thailand b	4.05	0.7	2.6	1.9	1.6	1	0	1	12
Viet Nam b	3.98	0.9	1.5	22	41	35	12
Korea, Republic of	3.39	7.3	7.3	2.5	1.3	–9	–8	–8	–7
Tunisia	3.27	0.8	1.0	1.1	1.3	10	4	1	20
Pakistan	3.03	0.3	0.9	1.1	1.2	9	4	22	12
Above 15	206.32	–	–	78.6	80.3	–	–	–	–
Importers									
European Union (25)	121.66	–	–	39.9	45.0	10	7	19	14
extra-EU (25) imports	65.86	–	–	20.9	24.4	11	7	20	15
United States	75.73	16.4	24.0	32.4	28.0	3	1	7	6
Japan	21.69	3.6	7.8	9.5	8.0	2	–8	11	11
Hong Kong, China	17.13	–	–	–	–	2	–2	2	7
retained imports	0.17	0.9	0.7	0.8	0.1	–44	–16	–38	–83
Russian Federation b	5.46	–	–	1.3	2.0	19	27	25	13
Canada d	5.22	1.7	2.1	1.8	1.9	9	2	12	16
Switzerland	4.34	3.4	3.1	1.5	1.6	8	7	15	9
Korea, Republic of	2.75	0.0	0.1	0.6	1.0	20	38	13	8
Australia d	2.67	0.8	0.6	0.9	1.0	9	11	20	22
Mexico a, b, d	2.58	0.3	0.5	1.7	1.0	–8	–5	–9	–15
Singapore	2.06	0.3	0.8	0.9	0.8	2	7	8	6
retained imports	0.56	0.2	0.3	0.3	0.2	0	18	–7	12
United Arab Emirates b, c	2.05	0.6	0.5	0.7	0.8	...	15	15	...
Norway	1.67	1.7	1.1	0.6	0.6	7	10	13	8
China a	1.54	0.1	0.0	0.6	0.6	7	6	5	8
Saudi Arabia c	1.03	1.6	0.7	0.4	0.4	...	6	13	...
Above 15	250.61	–	–	93.7	93.0	–	–	–	–

a Includes significant shipments through processing zones.

b Includes Secretariat estimates.

c 2003 instead of 2004.

d Imports are valued f.o.b.

Note

1. In terms of the share of world merchandise export, the global garment industry, the combination of textile and clothing, makes up about 8 percent. See Appendix 1 for details of global clothing flows.

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Biographical Note: Patrik Aspers is research fellow at the Max Planck Institute for the Studies of Societies in Cologne and research fellow and associate professor at the Department of Sociology, Stockholm University. He is the author of *Markets in Fashion: A Phenomenological Approach* (Routledge, 2005). His research interests are economic sociology, especially markets, fashion, sociological theory and phenomenology.

Address: The Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies, Paulstr. 3, 50676 Cologne, Germany. [email: aspers@mpifg.de]

Biographical Note: Lise Skov is a sociologist and associate professor of creative industries at Copenhagen Business School. Her PhD thesis was a study of Hong Kong fashion designers in relation to the global garment industry and the local art world. Her current research is on the culture and economy of fur. Publications include 'Fashion-Nation: A Japanese Globalization Experience and a Hong Kong Dilemma', in S. Niessen et al. (eds) *Re-Orienting Fashion* (Berg, 2003) and 'The Return of the Fur Coat: A Commodity Chain Perspective', *Current Sociology* 53(1) (2005).

Address: Department of Intercultural Communication and Management, Copenhagen Business School, Porcelainshaven 18A, DK-2000 Frederiksberg, Denmark. [email: ls.ikl@cbs.dk]