Fashion as Avant-Garde:

Jeremy Scott

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“Fashion, you see, goes out of fashion. Style never.”

- Coco Chanel

INTRODUCTION

“I like today and perhaps a little future still, but the past is really something I'm not interested in. So, as far as I'm concerned, I like only the past of things and people I don't know. When I know, I don't care because I knew how it was.” – Karl Lagerfeld

The above quote embodies an attitude of the superficial avant-garde in fashion—the way it exists today— the affinity for up-to-the-minute trends that evade expectations. However, there is a much greater potential for the avant-garde in fashion; an opportunity for fashion to affect social change. It has been argued that the avant-garde is dead in the art world, but does that mean it is dead altogether? Can it exist in the world of fashion? In order to answer this question, fashion must not only be defined as an art form outside of the world of art, but as better equipped to support the avant-garde than the art world is. It is also necessary to hash out a definition of the avant-garde through a contemporary lens, as the artistic and social milieus surrounding the term at the time of its inception have drastically changed. By comparing the practices of designers Karl Lagerfeld and Jeremy Scott, it can be concluded that the fashion world is the optimal place for the avant-garde to have control.

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2 Brainy Quote, http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/k/karl_lagerfeld.html

3 Please note that the terms “fashion” and “fashion world” are used interchangeably in this essay.
In order to argue that the fashion world is the optimal place for the avant-garde to have a stronghold, it is essential to first discuss how fashion is a form of art, moving from how it parallels the art industry, which it so often quotes but has long been excluded from, right down to its physical properties. What is primarily evident in the high art and fashion industries is that both are available only to a certain elite who are granted access by their wealth, style (in the fashion world) and erudition (in the art world). Much in the same way, the success of the artists and designers is determined by a body of elite critics that are generally neither artists nor designers themselves, and these few have what nears the influential power of a medieval monarch. Take, for example, Anna Wintour, the editor-in-chief at Vogue, who determines the predominant styles of each season in America. That-is-to-say, which designers are in and which are out, as well as how they must adjust their collections if they wish for her to promote them. The notorious art critic Clement Greenberg was in a similar position of power. Greenberg determined the major art movement in post-war America, advocating the Abstract Expressionist movement and Pollock while rejecting Pop Art and Andy Warhol as kitsch, or what he used to call “easy stuff”. It can be said that intellect gives credit to these critics’ decisions, but subjectivity and the notion of personal taste evidently play a huge role as well, and this is where power dynamics come in to justify the selection process. Although the art world tends to skirt around the subject, both are profit driven industries. Supposedly cutting-edge artists
are kept in check by critics because of the “umbilical cord of gold”⁴. This implies that artists are required to subordinate their creativity to the demands of the system should they wish to be successful in their practice and profits, and it is this implication that the art industry objects to. In the case study section of this paper, I will later examine how Karl Lagerfeld is an example of a supposedly avant-garde artist in the fashion world. His designs have been labeled as such although he manages to move smoothly and comfortably along without inciting negative critique or outrage from his colleagues and superiors – his collections have been consistently successful. Lastly, both industries are in constant dialogue with the movements and collections that preceded them. The tendency of the industries to constantly critique their history is what characterizes them, although art critiques the ideology of a previous movement (over a period of years) whereas fashion is rather an aesthetic critique that attempts to modernize the body with each new collection.

Fashion also qualifies as art based solely on its physical properties. In the simplest of terms, the clothing article itself is a form of soft sculpture that requires the human form for completion of the work. Like the plastic arts, the all-encompassing term under which fashion can be included, garments can take form in a variety of mediums limited not only to textiles, but to garbage bags and flattened aluminum cans as Jeremy Scott makes evident. There have even been instances where fashion has been displayed as art in museums. The Museum of Metropolitan Art contains a few evening gowns created by Charles James (and American couturier of the mid-1900s who believed himself to be a

true artist) in their collection\(^5\). Thus, fashion can be considered an actual art form, but it has generally been denied this status given that it operates outside of the art institution, although parallel to it. This exclusion, however, is what makes possible, in part, the opportunity for a revival of the avant-garde in the world of fashion.

FASHION AS AVANT-GARDE

When the term, avant-garde, came into common use in the social spheres of the art world, it was used to describe art that was ahead of its time, art that caused discomfort and shock among viewers. The aim of the historical avant-garde was to permeate everyday life praxis and incite social revolution that led to utopia (although it never realized this). As it came into more widespread use this term began to be applied to

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specific movements, and it is this specific application that limits the avant-garde in its success. Good art, art that is ahead of its time and therefore avant-garde, gets recuperated signifying that it is good art. But this recuperation also signifies the failure of this good art because it becomes familiar and watered-down; it becomes the norm and no longer a cutting-edge idea. This is the course that every good avant-garde art form takes as it gains popularity among the masses. This is evident with avant-garde movements such as Impressionism, and Cubism, both of which were quickly commodified by the bourgeois class. Good art forms follow a lifecycle: they make their appearance on the art world scene as cutting-edge, causing critical reaction. As this controversial art gains more and more exposure, it is brought into widespread use by low art subcultures until it finally becomes the norm, and a new art form rises up to counter the newly established norm and recommence the cycle. If the term avant-garde is applied instead to the first phase of this cyclical evolution instead of attributed to a specific movement, then it cannot fail. In the historical avant-garde this definition could not have been applied as the avant-garde was still in its early stages of classification. However, the viewer’s relationship to the image has evolved overtime. In the past, avant-garde artwork’s purpose was to incite revolutionary upheaval among the masses. Gilles Lipovetsky explains the how the contemporary attitude has shifted: “No longer inclined to die in great numbers for their ideas, human beings in modern democratic societies are always prepared for change; consistency has become old hat. People live less and less according to systems of dominant ideas; like the rest, such systems have been swallowed up by frivolity.” 7 Lipovetsky touches on two reasons for this shift in mentality, the first being that ours is

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no longer a society of extreme ideologies, but rather one of freedom of opinion and
tolerance. This apathy originates from a number of causes; anywhere from the separation
of church and state to the feminist movements of the early 1960’s that fought for equality
and acceptance to the laissez-faire attitude of the early capitalist system. The second
reason: contemporary occidental society is set to a much faster pace than its historical
counterpart. In a social milieu where instantaneous gratification has become the
expectation, and radical change is no longer viewed as a shock, but as a reprieve from the
mundane it is difficult for an artist to incite revolution with a piece that is seen as
obsolete even a week after its release. The fashion world itself is a great example that
mirrors this desire for constant change. It is a “frivolity”, a fluid system of superficial
importance that has replaced a dominant idea. With each new issue of *Vogue* fashion is
altered or revamped, and designers drastically alter their collection with each season,
following whatever trend has been designated as up-and-coming. Karl Lagerfeld shares
this vision of fashion as “the mood of the moment”¹⁸. Thus, the fashion industry’s
existence is based on the idea of the avant-garde – the moment of appearing on the scene
as cutting-edge. This is the hype of the fashion world, and the reason for which the
masses follow.

The fashion world can additionally be compared to the art world, and further
defined as an avant-garde system, by aligning its development with Peter Burger’s three
phases of art history in bourgeois society. The first phase was art’s isolation from society:
“The historical transition… was determined by the loosening, and ultimately by the
severing of artists’ dependence on patrons and their replacement by and anonymous,

¹⁸ *Connecting with Karl: An Intimate Conversation with Karl Lagerfeld*, Fashion Television Video Library,
structural dependence on the market and its principles of profit maximization.”

Although art had already been an elite enterprise for some time, the rules of the game were shifting. Instead of commissioners determining the content of a work, the artists themselves were filling that role, thus enclosing the sphere of art off from those that were not involved in the intellectual discourse. In the same way, the fashion world has been limited to a certain elite, and those in control of the industry are fully involved and considered erudite in the specialty. The second phase, on the precipice of which fashion is currently hovering over, took place the instant art began to reflect critically upon society, “[eliciting] those conditions in the spectator or reader (harmony between ‘sensuality’ and ‘morality’) that supposedly are the individual and psychological preconditions for the construction of an ideal society.” Hence, the second phase is the moment of the avant-garde. It is also the phase that fashion must reach in order to be considered avant-garde. That is to say, several designers must use their collections as an outlet for social commentary, in the same way Jeremy Scott does, before this can be achieved. The third phase consisted of the realization of the impossibility for art to influence society by communicating meaning due to the fact that “[t]he mode of reception [undermined] the critical content of the works.” The fact that the institution of art is separated from life praxis, allows the work to be easily digested by the outsider on a solely aesthetic level, nullifying the influence the work could have had. Fashion has

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10 Take for example Gustav Courbet’s Bonjour Monsieur Courbet (1854) where Courbet himself, not the commissioner, determined the content of the painting. It conveys the idea of the avant-garde artist being outside of the public, critiquing it, and preaching to it.
11 Ibid., xi.
12 Ibid., xi.
the potential to overcome the predicament of this phase, which was ultimately the failure of the historical avant-garde. Not only is fashion integrated into everyday life praxis, the ability to communicate meaning - or rather, to construct an identity - is inherent to the idea of fashion itself.

FASHION’S POTENTIAL

The fashion world is better equipped by its very nature to succeed as avant-garde – that is, to integrate itself even further into life praxis – than the art world, which has already failed to do so. The three characteristics of fashion that allow for this are: the impossibility of content to subordinate form, the refusal to mask strong ties to the economy, and the lack of reaction to preceding bodies of work.

In his book The Theory Death of the Avant-Garde Paul Mann states that “[a]s it turns out art is not autonomous, it cannot stand on its own; even an art that claims to depict reality as such needs theory to support it, to make it visible as art. What is worse: not only is the poor spectator dependent on this theory, so is the artist.”13 What matters in art is no longer the physical work, but the concept manifested in that work. This entails a subjective, seemingly arbitrary relation between form and content that is difficult to pick out without knowing the context. Unlike the art object, fashion can stand on its own without a theory to support it. Fashion’s primary and essential function is to provide warmth and serve as a covering for the human body, and it would be nearly impossible for this function to become subsidiary to the theory epitomized by the clothing article. Furthermore fashion is interactive (worn), automatically integrating itself into everyday life.

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13 Paul Mann, The Theory-Death of the Avant-Garde (Course Readings), 4.
life praxis, and communicative – clothing constructs an identity whether the wearer is cognizant of this or not. This communicative aspect of fashion is immediately apparent to any spectator – clothing connotes the social sphere to which one belongs, and an observer can classify a subject without needing to understand fashion theory. For the subject, the communicative aspect of fashion involves “the will to look unique and the need to do so in a recognizably attractive way.”\textsuperscript{14} and “how someone becomes noticed by others”\textsuperscript{15}. It is highly unlikely that an avant-garde in fashion could fail because it would be complimentary to the subject’s priority of constructing their identity. In other words, they would have the option to align themselves with certain social critiques, in addition to creating their immediately apparent identity, through what they wear. Ultimately, the clothing article in which meaning is materialized would not become subordinate to the meaning itself. At its roots fashion “is, after all, the way things look and get looked at, the way things appear.”\textsuperscript{16}.

Contrary to the art world, the fashion world does not deny that it relies on capital in order to exist, which is so highly evident that to claim the opposite would be absurd. Not only does the fashion world require a capitalist locale for its existence, but a liberal and democratic one as well, especially if an avant-garde is to exist within it. Andrew Hewitt, in his book \textit{Fascist Modernism} argues that this is the case for avant-garde art, drawing from Poggioli’s \textit{Theory of the Avant-Garde}:

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{14} Ron Scapp and Brian Seitz, “Introduction: Just Looks” in \textit{Fashion Statements}, 3.
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 4.
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 3.
\end{quote}
The avant-garde, like any culture, can only flower in a climate where political liberty triumphs, even if it often assumes a hostile pose towards democratic and liberal society. Avant-garde art is by nature incapable of surviving not only the persecution, but even the protection or the official patronage of a totalitarian state and a collective society, whereas the hostility of public opinion can be useful to it.\textsuperscript{17}

A liberal and democratic society allows the avant-garde a certain amount of freedom of expression - even a critique of the very political conditions within which it exists - that is not possible in a totalitarian state. Another advantage of the ideology is that aesthetics tend to escape politicization; artworks are not misused for political ends. Artwork sharing a similar style with the art of a totalitarian regime often appears purposefully politicized even though that may no have been the intent at the outset of its creation. Thus democratic occidental society is an ideal environment for the fashion avant-garde to flourish. In professing its capitalist nature, the fashion world does not need to contradict itself the way the art world does. This allows for a certain amount of transparency that can strengthen viewer relationship to the work. Rather than censuring superficial capitalist society, fashion embraces and uses it.

The avant-garde in art ultimately failed because it turned in on itself. Since Impressionism, the role of art was to assess its shortcomings, and there has been a reactionary movement to almost every preceding art movement: neo-impressionism, neodada, neoconcretism. However, the movement that poses a dilemma for the continuation

\textsuperscript{17} Qtd. in Andrew Hewitt, \textit{Fascist Modernism: Aesthetics, Politics, and the Avante-Garde} (Course Readings), 29.
of the defined avant-garde is the neo-avant-garde. The neo-avant-garde was a reaction to the very art that allowed for its existence: “the neo-avant-garde institutionalized the avant-garde as art and thus negates genuinely avant-gardiste intentions.”18. According to Burger, the neo-avant-garde officially put an end to the possibility of an avant-garde continuing in the art world. The avant-garde’s aim was to integrate art into life praxis, and in order to do this it could not be thought of as supportive of the institution with which it wished to break. To do so invalidated it. In the fashion world, the tendency to critique a former collection is not evident. Instead, fashion reinvents itself with each new season, and this renewal does not critique a former collection on the same political or theory-based level that reactionary art movements do. As a result, fashion does not negate itself nor limit its own potential in the way art movements do. The avant-garde in fashion can exist as collections that critique society independent of one another. This is possible in the fashion world because the trends change so quickly, so they are able to react to the current goings-on. The fast pace also allows fashion to escape the detrimental effects of recuperation, which does not occur here in the same way it does in the art world. In place of reactionary collections that would lessen the implications of an original, recuperation takes the form of mimesis in low culture. That is to say, high fashion trends filter their way down to department stores, but by the time they get there, the world of haute couture is already a season ahead if not further – it has let go of the trend even before it has been recuperated. It appears as though fashion, as an art form, has effectively evaded the problem of recuperation.

18 Qtd. in Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen, “Counterrevolution, the Spectacle, and the Situationist Avant-Garde”(Course Reading), 7.
Part II

KARL LAGERFELD

He has been dubbed the Andy Warhol of the fashion world by Michael Roberts, fashion and style director of *Vanity Fair*. Tommy Hilfiger has attributed him the title of “the king of fashion in the world”. He is followed closely by celebrity and style icons such as Nicole Kidman and Kiera Knightly. Unarguably, Karl Lagerfeld is the gold standard of the fashion world. That is not to say, however, that he is a good example of its avant-garde potential. Rather, he is an example of fashion’s current role in society which is to be constantly in advance of itself. Lagerfeld wholeheartedly embodies this idea: “Today is today, tomorrow is tomorrow. The next show is more important. Everything you did today is okay, but over.” Lagerfeld fits the avant-garde in one way: he is committed to keeping himself on the cutting-edge – he lives in the moment of the avant-garde, and fashion, according to him, “is the mood of the moment”. What his work is lacking is avant-garde resolve. In keeping a careful balance between semblance of the avant-garde and commercial stability, Lagerfeld’s trendy fashion is limiting its potential to take up the legacy of the art world and affect social change, and if not social change, then at least a collective change of perception. His work cannot be considered avant-garde precisely because it is liked the moment it is released. It fulfills the elite consumer’s need to construct a personal identity that is fully up to date, rather than

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19 *Connecting with Karl: An Intimate Conversation with Karl Lagerfeld.*

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.
shocking them into the realization that what one wears should say more. Furthermore, the fashion world as a whole views Lagerfeld as an avant-garde figure because he revolutionized Coco Chanel’s original vision, after being named its new art director in 1983, and continues to do so in the present day. The Chanel label was originally considered progressive not only because Coco changed the way that women dressed, but because she integrated herself into the upper circles of society – something that couturiers had never done before her. In doing so she created a trend in the fashion world. Prominent designers are no longer considered craftspeople, but influential artists, admired by their followers. Lagerfeld took Chanel’s innovative vision to a whole new level: “I have to find a way, my way, to make Chanel something of today’s world.” Critics praise him and his success in reinventing the label with every new season; they are ecstatic over his designs rather than appalled. The fashion world sees itself as radical, but it is no more than a superficial avant-garde, that does nothing more than fuel consumer needs and present new alternatives of self-representation.

JEREMY SCOTT

Contrary to Lagerfeld, Jeremy Scott “has let his creative instincts rather than commercial ambitions drive him” as is evident with the failure of certain past collections. For him, fashion is about commentary rather than commerce. He desires to explain North American culture and address contemporary issues of concern, which is best addressed in his collection “Right to Bear Arms” in the spring of 2007. The

23 Ibid.

collection consisted of shirts adorned with the motif of a care-bear carrying a machine gun, military helmets crowned with Mickey Mouse ears, and even a floor-length “gown” emblazoned with the Declaration of Independence. Scott intended for the collection to serve as a commentary on the aftermath of the events of September 11th. He was appalled that President Bush, at the time, dubbed the war against Afghanistan as a “compassionate war”, so he juxtaposed childhood cartoon imagery with weapons to stress the absurdity of this claim. He also addressed the consequences of the Patriot Act on the American people. He said of rights being put on hold or waived, “let’s claim ‘em, let’s take ‘em, let’s wear ‘em”.

Over the years Scott has realized that many influential people in the fashion world may not share his belief in the potential of fashion, and he knows this from first-hand experience. In 1999 he was shunned from the fashion world after the failure of his “gold collection”. Isabella Blow, one of the same critics who had praised his three previous shows, expressed her uncertainty in the designer after witnessing the “gold collection”: “He makes people very uncomfortable. His clothes are frightening, He is frightening.”

Scott tends to not only blur the boundaries between fashion and art (he has referenced artists such as Orlan and Keith Haring in his collections), but also between high and low culture, both of which tend to perturb fashion elites. He has also been slammed for his habit of shouting “Vive l’avant-garde!” at the end of his shows.

Later, in 2004, his “Beverly Hills collection” was better received than the “gold collection”, but still critiqued for unconventionality. “Great show, but where’s the beef,”

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25 Ibid.

said Godfrey Deeny of *Fashion Wire Daily*, “I’d love to see some clothes in the collection someday.” Despite the shock and dissatisfaction that these collections have caused among prominent figures within the fashion world (including, but not limited to Anna Wintour) Scott has managed to amass a following of young people. His tendency to draw on subcultures for inspiration and play with pop culture makes his style attractive to youth who do not care about status or wealth, but have a striking individual style. Perhaps this is due to the desire of young people to take a political stance with the clothes they wear. One of his fashion savvy admirers sums up the reason for Scott’s success among the generation: “[He] takes things that people actually want to wear, pushing them to the absolute boundaries.”

Scott exemplifies what a designer of the avant-garde in fashion would look like. That is to say, his clothes not only comment on and use pop culture; they take a stance on problems within society. For example, the way in which his designs parody “brandalism” serve as an excellent reminder of the hidden shortcomings of capitalist society. By replacing a brand name with his inside a familiar logo that he has placed on a sweater, Scott draws attention to the overarching tendencies of corporations to impose their stamp on public facilities. Fashion currently has form and context, but it lacks content. Scott fills in the gap between these two, indefinitely situating fashion within its time.

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CONCLUSION

Karl Lagerfeld is not avant-garde, but rather modern because he chooses to get ahead in the game of fashion without adding accompanying meaning to his collections. Jeremy Scott, on the other hand is less concerned with being popular, and more so with expressing his concerns about contemporary society through his designs.

Avant-garde fashion is a type of fashion that does not allow you to digress into the everyday while existing in the everyday. Fashion does say something although it may not necessarily have been designed to. Imagine the implications of clothes that were designed with an underlying concept in mind. What one wears will do more than construct their immediate identity; it will allude to their political stance, their values and


opinions, just as the art one chooses to hang in their home has the power to do. However, the concepts connoted by paintings, for example, are not as closely tied to construction of identity the way garments are. Garments are integral to daily life in occidental society, home décor is not. Thus, the avant-garde is not dead, it is laying dormant, waiting for fashion to stumble upon and take full advantage of it.

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