

Assignment 3: cultural identity part 2: fashions in clothing, music and links

Assignment:

This week we are thinking about how fashion is used to communicate identity. The fashion can be in any media - clothing can be a social medium, as can music, automobiles, home furnishings, or, in the online world, links.

Please read the selected chapter. As you do so, think about these questions: how do these media (i.e. clothes, cars, links, etc) acquire social meaning? How do these meanings change? Why do they change? Can you map out a relationship between differentiation and imitation as forces of cultural change? Can you distinguish between the inherent or symbolic meaning of an object and its social/fashion-based meaning? What is the impact of the affordances of a medium (say, clothing vs. links vs. music) on its dissemination? What is the role of the media?

In your writing, discuss examples from both the physical world and the online world. Is there "fashion" online? How is it manifest? What do you think the future will hold?

Response in random thoughts:

Broken down, there are two main types of fashion that must be considered: objects and knowledge. They must be separated because the possession and dissemination of these two are dramatically different.

Most objects are created for a purpose, in a particular time period, for a particular owner or class of owners. In their creation, they already have meaning in relation to their owner or society. Simply the possession of these meaningful objects situates them and their owner within society. Part of what makes objects valuable is their tangibility, being one in a limited set. The rarer an object is, the more valuable it is. When an object is rare and in possession of an admired individual, it is likely to become fashionable out of desire. The more common an object, the weaker its value; thus an easily duplicated object is less valuable.

While the value of objects is socially defined, there is still a unique challenge in being able to possess something physical. Knowledge-based fashion is quite different because knowledge is easy to disseminate and easy to possess. Thus, in order to make knowledge valuable, it must be publicly known that an individual has knowledge while simultaneously not revealing the actual knowledge so as to not weaken its value. Unlike objects, knowledge loses its value simply by being put on display, yet at the same time must often be displayed in order to give the owner credibility.

Fashion in the digital world must deal with this confound. Unlike physical objects, digital ones can be easily duplicated. Likewise, knowledge can be quickly disseminated while it's a challenge to show that one possesses information. Such an environment magnifies the speed in which fashion changes, just as factories shortened the fashionable lifetime of clothing by making the objects more accessible. Because of the duplicateable nature, most digital "fashion" is in the form of knowledge not objects.

Memes are an interesting digital example. In being the first person to share a particular meme, the owner of the knowledge is perceived well. Yet, should the forward be considered lame or been previously seen, the owner is seen as behind the times, even if the life of the meme is less than a day old. There is a tipping point in knowledge when it goes from being

elite to being common, like the spread of gossip.

There is one digital site where digital object ownership is exceptionally valuable for its rarity and that would be gaming. In environments like Asheron's Call, the developers create certain objects with limited quantities. For example, they might create 5 red vests. Whether these objects are acquired through skill or luck, they quickly become monetarily valuable, traded either internally within the system or externally on sites like eBay (where some fashionable gaming items sell for hundreds of real-world dollars). When gamers figure out how to duplicate items or the developers release more of a particular item, the value quickly deteriorates. Because the worlds were created to encourage fashion (complete with actual fashion shows), this type of social economy quickly mimicked the real world.

On a completely different note, I would like to take issue with McCracken's analysis of divestment rituals. He fails to acknowledge or integrate the collector, the vintage clothes shopper or the antique dealer. While many people want to divest objects to make the possession seem original, there are also many individuals who value objects with history, for a variety of different reasons. Some value objects previously owned by famous individuals; others value them for their time-based authenticity. For whatever the reason, there is a tremendous value in objects with history, placing them in a context that the current owner wants to associate with, or giving them a uniqueness that is inherently valuable, where the uniqueness comes from both the object and its association in context.

In the digital world, such history is hard to maintain. Objects don't hold on to unique stains. The only comparable example of this would be complete collections (i.e. Google's groups, archive.org) which are valuable for their magnitude if not uniqueness. Traces of the past help give people context now, which makes previously invaluable objects or ideas valuable now (i.e. Linus' announcement of Linux on Usenet as announced by Google). Yet, unlike the physical objects that have traces, knowledge objects are mostly valued in their nostalgia, giving the owner social rewards but not economic ones.