

**For a Sociology of Fashion: bodies,  
media and aestheticization. Why  
read Joanne Entwistle?**

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Sociology as a constituent part of the humanities is produced in the text. Sociological thinking and imagination – substantial elements of this *métier* – exist purely and only in the abstraction of another world. They configure the amorphous and complex matter that will be embodied and systematized in textual production. In this sense, the interested sociologist acts as a channel through which this set of hypotheses and imagined universes must necessarily traverse in their gestational process. The embodied *corpus* of sociology is, therefore, a construct generated by this intellectual equation that causes continuous collisions between imagination and test, an operation of shaping the social fact imagined from an empirical and scientific effort on it.

Thus, the operationalized methodology in the argumentation and verification of sociological phenomena exists in/through the text. Text not only as a written form of language, but also text as image in the tradition of a visual ethnography that produces some equivalence between optical testimony and anthropological description (PINK, 2001). It will be in this correspondence between the imagined social phenomena and the collection of data, field research, production of statistical bases, participant observations, and interviews that produce the point of convergence between imaginary and science; between what is assumed and what is detected.

From Georg Simmel<sup>2</sup> to Pierre Bourdieu<sup>3</sup>, many sociologists have identified in fashion some cultural, political and economic phenomena – and analyzing them from a scientific perspective they generated important debates about the conformation and the disputes for power in social world. There are several themes and perspectives developed by sociology in highlighting fashion as a social phenomenon: Thorstein Veblen (1965) studied consumption types – conspicuous, vicarious – as elements of the social class definition, indicating, therefore, their propensities, sensibilities, rights, and obligations; to Gabriel de Tarde, creator of the theory of imitation, “social being, in so far as it is social, is imitator in essence [...]” (TARDE, 2000, p. 13), and demonstrates – through fashion – one of the most visible forms

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<sup>2</sup> Georg Simmel (1858-1918) is considered, along with Max Weber, one of the founders of German sociology. His work *Philosophy of fashion*, initially published in 1909, is cited as one of the initial texts to identify a sociological problem in fashion.

<sup>3</sup> Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002) was a French sociologist responsible for several studies in the area of culture, art, media and education. In the development of his theory of homology of and the legitimacy of cultural tastes, he turns to fashion on several occasions, aiming to illustrate its social functioning concepts such as symbolic capital. Among his most celebrated works on the subject are *Le couturier et sa griffe: contribution à une théorie de la magie* (1975) with Yvette Delsaut, and the essay *Haute couture et Haute culture*, published in his book *Questions de sociologie* (1980).

of upper social classes imitation, provoking in response social processes of differentiation; Georg Simmel, in his turn, will broaden this reflection by identifying in fashion a correlation with modernity, dated and situated in the new industrial urban centers. For him the idea of differentiation – inseparable from the fashion processes – materializes in two relational dimensions, that is, synchronic and diachronic (what differentiates, differentiates in the register of simultaneity and in the register of succession); thus, the theme of the simultaneity of styles finds in fashion, “as perhaps in no other phenomenon, [...] the double dimension of the process of differentiation that permeates society” (WAIZBORT, 2008, p. 9).

From the “first theoretical key to thinking about fashion in the capitalist and industrialized world, the theory of social distinction”<sup>4</sup> (BUENO, 2006, p. 10), to the most recent discussions that cross the sociology of fashion (namely, the role of internet; the polarizations between fast-fashion and slow-fashion; street fashion culture and subcultural/countercultural fashion; small-scale alternative markets; sustainability), one question seems constant: fashion and dressing permeate the entire contemporary consumer society. Therefore, regardless of the categorizations of class, gender, race, scholar capital, and demographic levels, we find that we are pushed – by necessity or desire – to consume and participate in this system. No wonder Jean Baudrillard, in his analysis about Western societies from the second decade of the twentieth century, will argue that the relationship with consumption begins to operate at a cultural level, responding to the acceleration of markets and technologies, and consolidating an *économie des images* (BAUDRILLARD, 1988).

This debate that discusses consumption as imagetic (and therefore aesthetic)<sup>5</sup>, helps us understand the extent and relevance that fashion assumes in contemporary times, at the same time as a subjective expression of personalities but also in an objective organization of subjects in community, class, and generation levels. It will be this kind of fashion reading that organizes the work of British sociologist Joanne Entwistle, professor and researcher at King’s College in London. In her work about fashion economies, *The aesthetic economy of fashion* (2009), Entwistle focuses on the shaping of another type of economy in this industry, which in her view institutes the aesthetic dimension as a producer of interested symbolic capital (translatable into economic equivalents).

An aesthetic market is one in which an aesthetic quality – be it a look or style – is commodified, that is, defined and calculated within a market and sold by profit. Many products and services are styled and this is a part of the product they sell. However, I am interested in markets where an aesthetic quality is the *core com-*

<sup>4</sup> Apart from their particularities, the theories elaborated by Simmel, Veblen, and Tarde have a point of confluence regarding the social functions of fashion, which operates in the processes of inter-class and intra-class distinction and differentiation.

<sup>5</sup> *Économie des images*: Baudrillard (1988) argues that the second half of the 1980s is associated with a resizing of consumption from the new ways in which media and culture came to focus on subjects and how they lived, in a turning point suddenly everything was considered more cultural. Within a system of objects as he defines it, consumption is not toward the commodity, but toward the sign.

*modity*, rather than when the aesthetics is important in the process of selling something. (ENTWISTLE, 2009, p. 10)

The real aesthetic markets according to Entwistle are those where “aesthetics are not something ‘added on’ as a decorative feature once a product has been defined”; in those markets, “*they are the product/s* and, as such, are at the center of the economic calculations of the practice” (ENTWISTLE, 2009, p. 10). The notion that describes aesthetics as a type of products’ soul – perhaps an approximation with the Benjaminian idea of aura will be possible – simultaneously spiritualizes and secularizes the dimension of these universes. It does not only account for a plastic reformulation of the products but also for their conceptual gain: aestheticization transcends objectuality to become gestuality; it spreads to the practices, institutions, agents, and bodies that participate in these realities. It will be, for example, what the author will find when she applied this conceptual model in the study of agencies specialized in the management of male models for the fashion market.

The capitalization of the aesthetic dimension of fashion acts in a reformulation of the apprehension of the world itself, this one now recognized as an “authentic hybrid, [...], aesthetic economies are examples of this ‘authentic hybrid’ and assert the necessity of understanding these markets as ‘economic’, and not merely ‘cultural’ or ‘aesthetic’” (ENTWISTLE, 2009, p. 11). The gain in this conception is the notion that “the economy can never be extracted from cultural concerns, [...], culture and economy are two sides of the same coin” (ENTWISTLE, 2009, p. 11), and operate – both culture and economy – in the power devices that regulate bodies, ways of being and performing the social.

This will also be the focus of the author’s other theoretical digressions – in *The fashioned body: fashion, dress & modern social theory* (2000), and as well in *Body dressing* (2001), in partnership with Elizabeth Wilson – the body will be discussed from the perspective of the centrality that dressing assumes for the performance of our identities, sexualities, and genders modalities that will be equally questioned – historically and theoretically – in the context of Western capitalism and its normatization of body and fashion.

In this interview given by the researcher on the occasion of the 15th Fashion Colloquium of Brazilian Association of Fashion Studies and Researches (ABEPEM) – held in Porto Alegre in September 2019 (when she participated as an international keynote speaker) –, Joanne Entwistle discusses her previous research that continues to be seminal in fashion studies, but also updates other debates (such as the consolidation of internet social networks, especially Instagram) and its role in remodeling and requalifying an entire imaging industry.

Unlike that sociological tradition that occasionally uses fashion to illustrate a social problem (assuming it as a temporary case study in the absence of another example), Entwistle establishes herself as a researcher who defends the necessity for a Fashion Sociology, thinking its relations with social theory, modernity, technology, and economics. Despite the relevance of her work in the field of fashion studies and a vast textual production, to date, her texts have had little entrance in the Brazilian academic universe, since her books and articles have not yet been translated into Portuguese.

For the readers who do not yet know the sociologist's texts, the question may arise: "Why read Joanne Entwistle?". That will be the question we will try to answer through this interview, producing a debate that helps us understand the importance of fashion in rewritten the culture as a social practice.

The interviewee is a reader in culture and creative industries, Professor and researcher in King's College, London. She has previously worked at London College of Fashion, University of the Arts, London; University of North London (now London Metropolitan University), and in the Sociology Department at the University of Essex.

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