

Fashioning Everyday Life: Exploring Consumption and Resistance in Everyday Life in Street Style Blogs

Introduction

In assessing the modern phenomenon of consumption and its impact on everyday life, French theorists Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau were notably different in their views. Hailing from the Marxist school of thought, Lefebvre believed that the everyday had become hijacked or colonised by capitalism and consumption engendered by modernity, which increased homogeneity and the deepening of social differences in everyday life where diversity used to prevail. Indeed, he saw the everyday as a product in an era where production engenders consumption, and where consumption is manipulated by producers—that is, the managers and owners of the means of production whether intellectual, instrumental or scientific—a process that left workers alienated from each other and themselves. He felt that without revolutionising everyday life, capitalism would diminish it and inhibit real self-expression. De Certeau, on the contrary, believed that while consumption has a major influence on the everyday, it does not fully colonise daily life and is actually an act of creative production and unconscious resistance where practices of individuals subvert the system and its dictates, albeit unintentionally. Indeed, in his theory of the everyday, there is no outline of revolution and no grand strategy of upheaval.

Nonetheless, what both thinkers shared was the view that capitalist modernity is characterised by sterility and a lack of style and aesthetics. Lefebvre commented that modernity and everyday life is “typical for its yearning and quest for style that obstinately eludes it...all the poetry of existence has been evicted.”¹ However, they felt that potential for transformation was ever present in everyday life, and that it existed in individual creativity. Lefebvre believed that these existed in moments of ‘effervescence’, and that the everyday could be reconfigured by the revolutionary endeavour of *la fête*, through which the expression of human potential could lead to the transformation of everyday life and the formation of

¹ See Highmore’s “Henri Lefebvre’s Dialectics of Everyday Life”, 149.

the Total Person. Similarly, de Certeau believed that despite the repressive aspects of modern society, there exists an element of creative resistance to these strictures in pockets of everyday life, enacted by ordinary people through a lexicon of practices that could infuse poetry and alternative meaning into everyday life. Both theorists also shared a scepticism of the knowledge of experts and specialists, and felt that the practices, experience and embodiment of the everyday should be taken more seriously and analysed in themselves, thereby situating agency strongly in the hands of the everyman.

Given these two different views of consumption that are yet at times strikingly similar, this paper attempts to stage a hypothetical conversation between Lefebvre and de Certeau in relation to street style fashion blogs. Through an exploration of both thinkers' theories, I will posit that these blogs, in changing the way that fashion is perceived and also documenting visible embodiments of the everyday through the clothes they capture, not only reflect key aspects of their theories but also offer an important way of viewing consumption and approaching the subject of resistance in everyday life.

Consumption as Productive Creativity and Unconscious Resistance

A phenomenon that has gained ground over the last decade, internationally renowned street style fashion blogs such as *The Sartorialist*, *Jak & Jil*, *Face Hunter*, *Garance Doré* and Singapore's *Shentonista* have grown from being websites run by amateur photographers to fashion authorities that offer an alternative perspective on fashion based on their photographs of ordinary people exercising their sartorial creativity.

Of course, fashion is also linked inextricably to consumption and consumerism, and the fashion industry is very much controlled by luxury conglomerates, global fashion brands as well as the mass media, all of which influence the production and consumption of clothes in a way that bears out Lefebvre's view that the everyday has been hijacked by consumption and a select

group of producers, leaving the average man or worker disempowered and alienated from himself as well as others. Indeed, despite the proliferation and growing awareness of fashion in emerging markets such as China, India, Russia and Southeast Asia, Europe and America still wield the greatest influence in terms of dictating global trends, with New York, Milan, Paris and London being the four major capitals where fashion is centred, and it is in these cities that luxury conglomerates such as LVMH (LVMH Moët Hennessy)² and Kering³ operate out of.

Moreover, as global demand for luxury goods rises, the manufacture of these products has also moved to countries such as China for their cheap labour, where workers who produce these goods are often the people who are least able to afford them. In this sense, they are not able to participate in the fashion that they themselves are creating, and are alienated from it. Similarly, high street chains such as H&M, Topshop, Zara and Primark also manufacture their wares in Third World countries, and the disparity between the lives of those who produce these goods and those who consume them was cruelly exposed in the recent collapse of a poorly-constructed garment factory in Bangladesh⁴, which involved workers compelled to labour relentlessly for meagre pay in order to produce goods considered inexpensive in First World nations.

Things are not much better in First World nations, where constant exposure to global influences means consumers are largely controlled by the fashion establishment, which dictates fashion and shopping trends. These come straight from the fashion capitals either through the Internet or magazines such as *Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar* and *Elle*, which dominate the fashion consciousness due to their reputations as style authorities, and leave the average consumer devoid of real autonomy in spite of what seems like limitless choice. These machinations

² Based in Paris, LVMH owns famous luxury labels such as Louis Vuitton, Céline, Givenchy and Dior.

³ Based in Paris, Kering owns famous luxury labels such as Gucci, Bottega Veneta, Saint Laurent, Alexander McQueen and Balenciaga.

⁴ Rana Plaza, an eight-storey textile factory building in a Dhaka suburb, collapsed due to shoddy construction in April 2013, killing 1,129 people and injuring over 2,000. It emerged that many fashion retailers such as Matalan, Bonmarché and Primark used the services of workers at Rana Plaza, and the collapse highlighted the poor working conditions and unsafe construction methods used in order to satisfy demand for affordable goods in the West.

are akin to the strategies through which de Certeau claims that institutions and structures of power have a hegemonic grip over the popular fashion imagination.

Nonetheless, the fact that most people cannot afford the looks on the luxury fashion runways opens up a gap—or in de Certeau's terms, leaves a remaindered space—where creativity and resistance can flourish. Moreover, the increasing awareness and assertion of one's personality when it comes to dressing in the age of individualism and relentless self-documentation on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram also offer an antidote to the top-down diffusion of style from the hegemonic fashion establishment. This unique context leads to consumers reinterpreting runway looks and trends cheaply to assemble outfits that suit their own aesthetic inclinations and daily needs, an act of bricolage⁶ that sees them infusing their own ingenuity and creativity in the pursuit of self-determination while transforming an act of emulation into what De Certeau would term tactics⁷, or unconscious resistance that consumers enact in environments defined by strategies. These practices thus reflect de Certeau's notion of tactics as a weapon of the weak, where the colourful and spontaneous⁸ ways in which people—who conventionally have no bearing or influence on fashion and cannot afford its products—put together their clothes in an artful way that defies established and prescribed trends, turning a position of weakness into one of strength. Indeed, the outfits captured in street style fashion blogs are typified by a vibrant eclecticism and individual authenticity, a powerful reflection

⁵ De Certeau refers to strategies as "the calculus (or the manipulation) of relations of force which becomes possible whenever a subject of will and power (a business enterprise, an army, a scientific institution) can be isolated. Strategy postulates a place susceptible of being circumscribed as a proper and of being the base from where relations can be administered with an exteriority of targets or threats (clients or competitors, enemies, the countryside surrounding a city, the objectives and objects of research etc.) See de Certeau, "On the Oppositional Practices of Everyday Life", 5.

⁶ According to de Certeau, bricolage acts as a reading of the everyday, and is performed through selection and recombination, creation and destruction of texts to form new ones. It is made from the pieces at hand, without a goal or project, a game played out with and against the text, which advances and retreats, "alternatively captivating, playful, protesting, fugitive." See de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 174.

⁷ According to de Certeau, a tactic is dispersed, clandestine act carried out by individuals. It is "a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus...Thus it must play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organised by the law of a foreign power." One who deploys a tactic "must vigilantly make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers. It poaches in them. It creates surprises in them." See Highmore, "Michel de Certeau's Poetics of Everyday Life", 159.

⁸ De Certeau believed that the unconscious—as outlined by Sigmund Freud—informs the everyday. He posited that consumers do not act rationally but instead display the irrationality of the unconscious. See Highmore, "Michel de Certeau's Poetics of Everyday Life", 164.

of the random and anti-reductionist way in which de Certeau perceived the everyday.

Furthermore, the creative assembly of clothes also offers an alternative narrative to the “texts”—whether the clothes, trends or magazines—transmitted by the hegemonic fashion establishment. These reflect de Certeau’s view that there can be as many readings as texts, which not only create new meanings and relationships but also situate power significantly in hands of the everyman and the everyday rather than fashion institutions and experts. Therefore, these creative acts reveal and undo the operational logic of the fashion hegemony and via unique acts of creative production, unmake and change it.

These acts of unconscious subversion are doubly reinforced by street style fashion blogs, which are themselves tactical platforms that undo the hegemony of the fashion system unintentionally in their pursuit of documenting the beauty and glamour that resides in the everyday. For instance, Scott Schuman, the American photographer behind *The Sartorialist*, professes that his images are dedicated to paying tribute to great personal style. In this respect, what Schuman does as a layperson is not different from the fashion magazines that claim to capture and transmit what constitutes superior style. However, there is no mistaking that Schuman’s images go against the established fashion grain despite their celebration of fashion. To begin, the subjects who are photographed are not always necessarily people who keep up with the dictates of the fashion establishment. Indeed, Schuman claims that his photographs “celebrate style through a wide range of ages, income levels and nationalities.”⁹ There is also an emphasis on the candid, with the photos often portraying ordinary people doing mundane things, whether it is commuting across the city, looking into a bookstore, waiting for transport or simply having a drink at a café.

Moreover, the way that they are photographed also lends credence to the idea of resistance, albeit unintentional. These are especially apparent in the work

⁹ See Schuman, 7.

of Tommy Ton, the Canadian photographer behind the blog *Jak & Jil*, who not only takes pictures of eclectic outfits much in the vein of Schuman's photos but also specialises in pictures that highlight the items worn rather than the wearer¹⁰. While highlighting specific objects such as shoes or bags instead of the wearer is not unusual in fashion photographs as a way to heighten the desirability of products, the quotidian is photographed by Ton as a thing of beauty in a way that glamorises the everyday and even fetishises it, a sensibility that goes very much against the highly stylised fantasy and luxurious glamour touted by the fashion industry. Schuman confirms the use of this unusual approach: "*The Sartorialist*, at its core, is about fashion, but I don't often think of 'fashion' when I look at my photos."¹¹ In fact, he describes his images as a "social document celebrating self-expression than a catalogue of skirt lengths or heel heights."¹² Indeed, in setting out to capture the beauty of everyday dressing, these bloggers have latched onto a way of celebrating style that inadvertently subverts the fashion establishment. In fact, even the way that the pictures are arranged on these blogs forms a kind of bricolage too—organised in no particular order except by the date they were captured, these blogs present collages that concretise the everyday just as they reinforce its randomness and plurality, which runs contrary to the commercial agenda of most fashion magazines.

Therefore, consumption in this case—both in the use of clothes and the documentation of them via blogs—resembles an act of creative production that de Certeau suggested rather than something that alienates and traps us, as Lefebvre postulated. Indeed, it is a positive, even emancipatory endeavour, not just for those who put the clothes together, but also for the bloggers who capture these people in their photographs. Indeed, just as their subjects write new narratives as a form of cultural expression through their clothes, the blogger does likewise through his documentation of these practices, visibly bringing what is hidden and evasive about the everyday into vivid life.

¹⁰ .See Annex B.

¹¹ See Schuman, 5.

¹² See Schuman, 5.

[Urban] Jungle Warfare: Redefining The City Through Tactics

Additionally, other than unconsciously taking fashion out of its ivory tower of exclusivity by capturing the creativity of ordinary people, the composition and setting of these photographs also provide new ways to think about the city and the use of space. Indeed, in considering these fashion blogs in relation to urban space, one sees Lefebvre and de Certeau's views converging in a complementary and mutually reinforcing manner. Often captured against urban landscapes both gritty and polished, the portraits captured by fashion bloggers contest the established perception and meanings of urban spaces by redefining these city spaces as canvases for individual creativity.

At the most fundamental level, Lefebvre's notion of space as a social product¹³ can be applied to the analysis of these photographs. Contending that space is a complex social construction based on values and meanings that affect spatial practices and perceptions, Lefebvre argues that this social production of urban space is fundamental to the reproduction of society, and of capitalism itself, as the social production of space is commanded by the hegemonic class as a tool to reproduce its dominance. This assessment would certainly seem to be true if we view the modern city as a product of the State, where infrastructure is largely organised to serve capitalistic and bureaucratic imperatives. However, through their foregrounding of sartorial creativity against otherwise mundane spaces, the photographs of street style blogs palpably undo the conventional associations of ordinary streets and buildings by reinventing them as sites of artistic potential and play. They also transform the quotidian into a space of glamour, turning the city into a text that is ripe for interpretation in a way that is different from how State institutions intended in their conceptualisation of the city.

In other words, in capturing tactical acts of dressing in tactical ways, street style fashion blogs unconsciously reclaim the authority of redefining urban spaces that reflect de Certeau's analogy of the consumer as a traveller in a strange land,

¹³ See Lefebvre *The Production of Space*, where he contends that space is a social product. He contended: "[Social] space is a [social] product...the space thus produced also serves as a tool of thought and of action...in addition to being a means of production it is also a means of control, and hence of domination, of power" (20).

who “brings a repertoire of practices into a space that was designed for someone else. The consumer brings otherness into society and inscribes a pattern into space that was not accounted for in its design.”¹⁴ This also affirms Lefebvre’s theory that every mode of production produces its own space, and the creative production by street style bloggers, as well as the new social relations they produce through the creation of these encounters that also elevate the everyman to an autonomous creative agent thereby creates and asserts a new space that establishes its own dominance and control as a site of social production.

This can be seen from the pictures of *The Sartorialist*¹⁵ and *Jak & Jil*¹⁶, where gritty urban landscapes of international cities like New York, London and Berlin are infused with artistic promise through their subjects’ sartorial creativity. However, the effect of altering the perception of a cityscape dramatically into one of creative potential is even more obvious in the pictures of *Shentonista*¹⁷, a local street style blog by photographer-blogger Darren Lee that documents the fashion exploits of corporate types in Singapore’s famous business district. Indeed, while the urban landscapes of international capitals like New York and London have already been romanticised in the world’s imagination as cities of aspiration and possibility through the mass media and remnants of colonial and imperialistic influence, the photographs on *Shentonista* reclaim Shenton Way—a familiar site laden with connotations of economic dominance—and redefine it as a place that teems with creative potential. In yet other pictures, subjects pose against backdrops that feature temples and construction hoardings to imply a certain cultural quotient and grittiness that defies Singapore’s reputation as a sterile cultural desert.

Furthermore, the way in which a photographer-blogger roams and navigates the city looking for subjects to photograph bears out de Certeau’s notion about walking as a long poem, a tactical act that is not only an escape from the

¹⁴ See Poster, 102.

¹⁵ See Annex A

¹⁶ See Annex B.

¹⁷ See Annex C.

cartological discipline of the architect's plan but inscribes its own meaning into the urban fabric. He theorised:

The long poem of walking manipulates spatial organisations, no matter how panoptic they may be: it is neither foreign to them (it can take place only within them) nor in conformity with them (it does not receive its identity from them). It creates shadows and ambiguities within them. It inserts its multitudinous references and citations into them (social models, cultural mores, personal factors). Within them it is itself the effect of successive encounters and occasions that constantly alter it and make it the other's blazon: in other words, it is like a peddler carrying something surprising, transverse or attractive compared with the usual choice. These diverse aspects provide the basis of a rhetoric. They can even be said to define it.¹⁸

Indeed, this is accentuated by the photographer-blogger's voyeur-like status, which gives him critical distance from the city's prescribed structure and connotations and frees him to approach the city as a text to interpret for himself. Additionally, by photographing creative sartorial acts that are gathered from random explorations around the city, he becomes an inventor of his own poetic of everyday life, creating a new narrative that defies the way the streets were organised by unveiling their artistic potential. This is further reinforced by the collage-like manner in which the pictures are eventually pieced together on his blog, which gives layer upon layer of new meaning to the urban fabric with each new entry.

Rethinking Resistance: The Quiet Revolution

Thus, while de Certeau would classify these acts as unconscious resistance that do not aim to produce an alternative system, these inventive exercises in urban spaces not only redefine them but contribute to a change in life and society as Lefebvre hoped, albeit with a lot less fanfare than he suggested. Furthermore, as street style fashion blogs have risen in prominence, the fashion establishment has also taken notice, and it has in turn been influenced by the more unpolished aesthetic of street style, which is evident in the clothes being produced as well as

¹⁸ See *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 101.

advertising campaigns¹⁹. Major fashion brands and publications have also initiated collaborations with several of these bloggers to promote various fashion projects, which bring an important balance to the fashion industry, and in fact is revolutionising how fashion is perceived and produced.

For instance, Schuman, whose blog boasts a traffic of 14 million views a month, has collaborated with major fashion labels such as Burberry, Coach and DKNY Jeans to photograph their ad campaigns. To date, he has also published two best-selling anthologies of his best street-style pictures, and his work has been featured in major publications such as *GQ*, *Vogue Italia*, *Vogue Paris* and *Interview*. His pictures also reside in the permanent collections of the Victoria & Albert Museum and the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography. Ton, likewise, has been asked to use his photography skills to chronicle the comings and goings of the parade of fashionistas who grace the fashion shows every season on behalf of *Vogue's* online platform *Style.com* and *GQ.com*, lending his unique vision to increase the credibility of the fashion establishment. He has also photographed luxury retailer Lane Crawford's ad campaign and has seen his work being featured in *The New York Times* and *The Boston Globe* among others.

Thus, while Lefebvre's utopian vision entailed staging a revolution through the carnival in order to reconfigure everyday life and enable the expression of human potential, the unconscious creativity of the individual as postulated by de Certeau's theory of tactics seems the more realistic and viable form of resistance, where real change is enacted from within the system quietly by individuals who move between agency and structure instead of denouncing the establishment altogether. Indeed, this approach has not only led to a paradigm shift in fashion production and journalism but has engendered the real possibility of an alternative system instead, even though it was not intended. Moreover, although Lefebvre felt that the everyday has become colonised by technology²⁰ and consumer society, street style fashion blogs demonstrate that both of these forces

¹⁹ See Annex D.

²⁰ Lefebvre was wary of the fetishising of systems devised by technocrats and saw them as exercising inordinate control over society. See Highmore, "Henri Lefebvre's Dialectics of Everyday Life", 117.

can be successfully harnessed to turn the establishment on its head while bringing life and creativity back to people and bringing them back to themselves. This in itself offers an important lesson on approaching the subject of resistance in everyday life. Given that we live in a world where systems are inescapable and inevitably encroach on every aspect of our lives, perhaps it is increasingly the case that quiet subversion is more effective in enacting real and enduring change.

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