

From Fashion Forecasting to Coolhunting. Previsional Models in Fashion and in Cultural Production

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Abstract

The transition from haute couture to prêt-à-porter in the 60's has created in the fashion industry a great revolution both on the sides of production and consumption. One of the most relevant aspects in this process is the emergent demand of predicting future trends, in order to acquire a higher level of competitiveness compared to competitors. It is the birth of a structured activity known as fashion forecasting, managed by bureaux de style and embodied in trendbooks. Nowadays, this activity is often referred to as coolhunting, a striking term that implies an idea of research as intuitive «hunt» of incipient signals in fashion and in consumers' lifestyles.

The paper discusses coolhunting, a developing professional activity, as an emblematic place of symbolic mechanisms that are crucial in order to explain not only the fashion system but also many cultural processes of production and consumption of material goods rich in immaterial contents. The aim suggests that coolhunting is historically rooted in fashion forecasting, but it is also characterized by a relevant set of novelties, above all the shifting of research from a monolithic interest in fashion fads to socio-cultural trends that involve the whole symbolic imagination of the customer. A second important point is the extension of fashion's forecasted model to many branches of cultural production, more and more involved in a trend-oriented logic. Coolhunters emerge also as «messengers of distinction», the matching point between the consumers' need of distinction and the producers' attempt of creating distinctive goods.

Key Words: Fashion forecasting, Coolhunting, Cultural intermediaries, Trends, Cultural production, Trickle-down theory

1. The emerging of coolhunting

The term «coolhunting» indicates a research approach that has had its run during the 90's breaking the traditional marketing schemes and attempting to understand better the world of consumption through an immersion of daily occurrences with particular frequency in certain parts of the population (mostly young) with techniques in line with anthropology and qualitative sociology, in which the quantitative approach of the market studies leaves in place an ethnographic observation driven by the intuition of

the researchers. The professional activity of the coolhunter, consisting of research into the emerging trends through observation out and about, was interpreted as the signal of the inversion of the rules that spread style and fashion¹, that from the model trickle-down (from the social elite to the consumer masses) it passes to the other end to trickle-up²: it would be the young, the subcultures, the effervescent areas to produce, from the basics, style innovation that spread through the highest social classes.

Coolhunting has attracted the interest of journalists, essayists, and scholars³, even inspiring novels and fiction⁴ often spoiled by a celebratory tone depicting the coolhunter as a youngman travelling the world with his digital camera in hand searching for cool images to send to customers and research agencies. On the opposite side of the spectrum, other authors have described coolhunting as a frivolous activity even mystifying which lays a trap for the authenticity of the subculture in order to sell to companies suggestive information with disputable commercial value⁵. For fashion scholars, coolhunting signals the assertion of new players in the area of trend research that ceases to be an exclusive practice of the fashion system in order to become strategic activity area for all the companies involved in the production of consumer goods.

In order to investigate the empty space included between the two diametrically opposed stereotypes of the coolhunter, I conducted an empirical investigation based on 43 in-depth interviews of the professionals engaged in trend prediction⁶. This investigation brought to light among several aspects how the «trend hunt» contributed to extend the logic of fashion to the numerous production sectors which were in the past lacking a fashion-oriented sensitivity.

2. Fashion forecasting and Bureaux de Style

For the entire period that Lipovetsky calls the «hundred years' fashion»⁷, from the opening of the first atelier by Charles-Frédéric Worth in 1857 to the first Salon du prêt-à-porter in Paris in 1957, the system of fashion functions according to a highly-centralized logic in which the French capital is the undisputable jet engine of style; it deals with a context characterized by a high-level of consensus on what is fashion, whose advance follows the law of trickling-down⁸ in a class-structured society rather rigid and defined⁹. In this description, the trends have a well-known geographic origin: the Parisian haute couture, through the work of a tightly-knit group of couturiers, «said law» and it is emulated the world over.

The forecast of trends is a necessity that emerges in the 60's of the 20th Century with the birth of prêt-à-porter in conjunction with some phenomena that have radically changed the face of the fashion system. The

industrial production of clothing begins with the development of its own lines of products, thereby, abandoning the imitation of high-end fashion, and offering the public clothing in mass à la page with accessible pricing¹⁰. In the meanwhile, Paris loses its own leadership and sees other cities encroaching on its name to fame such as Milan, London, New York and Tokyo in the role of trend capital, and young people are seen as the protagonists and the new innovators of style. The fashion designers start to copy ideas from urban subculture in the need to produce clothes in line with the trends that emerge from the media and pop culture. At a productive level, the growing competition strengthens the sensation of being late with respect to the market movements giving rise to frenetic forecasting activity of trends¹¹.

Between the end of the 60's and the beginning of the following decade, the activity of fashion forecasting took hold within the world of fashion oriented to two poles of interest: the first, inside the fashion system, has the objective to individualize lines and colors for the following collections by way of a constant dialogue with the production factory and the observation of the competition; the second, outside, looks at what is happening "on the street", in the fashion zones, attempting to understand the changes in the styles of the consumers. Strictly connected to the fashion forecasting is the editing of the trend notebooks or trendbooks, edited products that identify material, colors, lines and emerging forms, work instruments very useful to designers as a source of inspiration and updating on what is new. The conditions of possibility (and necessity) of coolhunting hide inside the system of prêt-à-porter, at the same pace with the acceleration of the fashion cycles, which impose a frenetic run-up to the latest trend. However, if the fashion forecasting is an endogenous activity for the fashion system, aiming to identify color, line and fabric trends, the coolhunting tries to understand the social trends linked to lifestyles.

The fashion trend shows a character prevalently auto-referential, in which the specific logic of the field of fashion is made. The process that carries it to the selection of the seasonal fashion trends is very articulated, but may be pieced together according to the timeline in which three things happen¹²: (1) the bureaux de style that produce trendbooks subdivided by product category; (2) the producers of fiber that, based on the trendbooks or independent research activity, supply their own clients a wide view on the trends; (3) textile shows with semi-worked products, another phase of selection and interpretation of trends, that since there is a place to meet for the workers of the fashion sector, they become moments of synthesis, comparison, and circulation «by osmosis» of the trends. Without forgetting, of course, the determining role of fashion journalism, whose power at

influencing is exercised not on the creative designers themselves but on the final consumer.

The distinction between a fashion forecasting, oriented towards endogenous trends of the fashion system, and coolhunting aimed at the social trends, valid in theoretical terms, is in practice less clean. The job of coolhunting on the internal workings of the fashion world goes from the net refusal to acceptance in the form of external consultation or work directly from the fashion company.

High fashion, first lines, and brand labels trend maker, generally speaking, express a distance from coolhunting, seen as competitive with respect to the creative activity of the stylist and useless with respect to the company objective to «create style»; the research that runs after more so the «"inspirations» and not the trends is carried out directly by the creative minds of the company. Such a refusal favors, in part, the representation of the stylists of the brand labels whose artists and heirs of the Parisian couturiers¹³ and their self-representation as creators of original models; in the other part, it is consistent with the image of the brand which the market sees as a reference point. This behavior is rooted in the stylists who perceive coolhunting as an activity of observation and imitation.

The other levels are more open-minded to the use of coolhunting: there are few companies that have a coolhunting department internally (as for example, the fast fashion companies). There are more that utilize external consultants. Specifically, smaller companies trust more easily the external coolhunter consultant because of the economic impossibility of using resources intentionally dedicated to research that requires elevated costs above all for travelling.

The two possible behaviors of the fashion companies are – create style or follow the trends – they should not be considered to be understood as rigid alternatives, but rather as two poles of a continuum that, at its central or middle part, includes those companies that work in order to set the company style without ignoring the actual trends (endogenous and external) out there, in a continual balance renegotiated between brand identity and renovation, style and research, observation and re-elaboration. Even in the absence of a dedicated coolhunting department, and notwithstanding the inescapable role of the fashion designer, coolhunting is not a strange activity regarding the overall competencies of the stylists, whose activity includes the consultation of both paper and digital inspirational sources (e.g., the traditional trendbooks and online databases such as WGSN and fashion photoblog like The Sartorialist¹⁴). Such instruments resulting in trendwatching carried out by the agencies and special players connect coolhunting to the work of the stylists who tend, however, to clarify its dependence on the creative phase.

3. **Beyond the Confines of Style**

The speed of the fashion cycles poses a problem of content providing in the field: in the impossibility of proposing radical novelties at a rhythm of every six months (or multi-month in the case of fast fashion), the system has to chase after a continual recycling of styles, even if already seen, updated, reinterpreted and contaminated, cyclically return to the scene. Through this mechanism inevitably linked to the necessity of studying and anticipating the trends, fashion has given roots to a model of production and consumption that is today expanding into the ever-widening sectors of the cultural industry.

The logic of rapid circulation and obsolescence of trends typical of fashion is progressively extending itself into the world of consumption; at the same time, paradoxically, fashion is the sector that refuses to associate itself with coolhunting, or it exercises it auto-referentially (the trend endogenous research to fashion system), thereby remaining more faithful to the traditional fashion forecasting rather than opening itself to a wider study of lifestyles and social trends.

The market research agencies that use coolhunting are working today on the hypothesis of interdependence between fashion and lifestyle considering clothing as a part only in a picture more complex, in which the consumer chooses objects and experience of consumption always less as a status symbol and more like a lifestyle symbol. This explains why, notwithstanding the trend research born within the fashion world, the more complete forms of coolhunting, understood as research and analysis of social trends, are those begun by who observes at 360 degrees consumer behavior, reading the larger single signs like socio-cultural trend manifestations.

It is with the activity of market research agencies that coolhunting acquires a new face, making itself autonomous from the fashion sector. If in fact the endogenous trend research of the fashion system has to do with in great part to the activity of fashion designer, the analysis of socio-cultural trends needs to be wider and less sector-based. The market research agencies come into play and investigate the expressive trends and emerging consumption through desk qualitative technique (media and web monitoring) and field (observation), reporting ad hoc for a buyer or multiclient (accessible through membership to businesses that pay a periodic fee).

Institutes, such as the Dutch one, Science of the Time, or the Milanese one, Future Concept Lab¹⁵, work on the continual gathering of information in the most vivacious contexts from the point of view of elaboration of trends, in order to make an analysis based on the requests of the buyers. Such institutes present agile structures, articulated on two

principal levels: the first is that of coolhunters, called even alternatively observers, correspondents, or trendwatchers, from which comes an informative flow of images, written words, and the first interpretations of phenomenon subject to observation. The second level is constituted of research agency team; from the one side, it keeps in contact with the buying agencies, transforming their requests into research projects, and from the other side, coordinates the correspondents, specifying their observation objectives through a brief, receiving from a result of the work in the field, report composed of text and images.

This form of coolhunting, far from the simple activity of researcher of stylistic details, represents a research approach (still scarcely codified) of qualitative nature, having as subject the evolution of experience of consumption and socio-cultural images, and for (commercial) objective the return of creative input to the client or buyer, and for descriptive output report, conceptual maps and classifications of trend phenomena.

The attention of researchers with coolhunting moves towards the external trends to the field of fashion; socio-cultural trends not easy to read which the coolhunters try to codify through the gathering of «signals on the road», meaning information not structured on the consumption behavior that have a place in the popular social context by the trend setter. Coolhunting offers together research techniques – still little structured and methodologically perfectible – with the ambition to have a rapid transformation of the consumption world ever more subject to the cyclical laws of fashion.

4. Conclusion

Coolhunting is today a complex field (in the sense of Bourdieu¹⁶, that understands the field as a social arena in which there are clashes or alliances formed in order to insure «the stakes», with rules totally clear only to the participants of the competition) populated by three categories of players that contend for a stake of the market with a high economic value, that is to say the knowledge of the socio-cultural trends. We have seen that the first category, historically, is that of the operators of the fashion system, together with today the market research agencies that utilize coolhunting; but there is a third nucleus, made up of free-lance, that includes a series of professionals whose job consist in «using the eyes» (journalists, sociologists, anthropologists, photographers, architects, etc.), who are able to work in fashion as well as in the market research.

All of these players occupy a position in the middle between production and consumption, an element that makes them «cultural intermediaries»¹⁷. Coolhunting, in fact, offers as a strategy to identify the

differences in the field of consumption, and has as its objective to transpose them into the production fields, making them into consumption products in which the consumers can more easily recognize and choose the material plugs and symbols with which to form one's very own lifestyle. The social role of the coolhunter is that which hinges between productions and consumption, a meeting point between two distinct wants: that of the production that sells the consumer goods as instruments for the construction of differences, and that of the consumption that feeds it in partial awareness and unawareness. The coolhunter adds a third level of distinction, working on research (in consumption) of that which is different, in order to transfer this information to the production; his work is that to intercept the distinction, studying the consumption experiences and the collective fantasies in which innovative practices manifest themselves, uses of assets as expressive instruments, trends that represent changes in taste. This «work», invented by the fashion system about a half century ago, is today a key function in order to connect the cultural post-Ford industries and their always more competent consumers.

Notes

¹ M Gladwell, 'The Coolhunt'. *The New Yorker*, March 17, 1997.

² G A Field, 'The Status Float Phenomenon: The Upward Diffusion of Innovation'. *Business Horizons*, vol. 13, 1970, p. 45-52. T Polhemus, *Streetstyle: From Sidewalk to Catwalk*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1994.

³ See, among the others: M Albom, 'How Corporate America Hijacked «Cool»'. *The Holland Sentinel*, July 8, 1998. B Goodman and R Dretzin, 'The Merchants of Cool. A Report on the Creators and Marketers of Popular Culture for Teenagers'. *Frontline*, Pbs, Wgbh, Boston (MA), 2001. R La Ferla, 'Once Hot, Now Not, Cool Hunters Are in a Deep Freeze'. *The New York Times*, July 7, 2002. L Grossman, 'The Quest for Cool'. *Time Magazine: What's Next?*, vol. 48, August 31, 2003. N Southgate, 'Coolhunting with Aristotle'. *Marketing Intelligence & Planning*, vol. 21(7), 2003, p. 453-461. I A Fontenele, 'Os caçadores do cool'. *Lua Nova*, vol. 63, 2004, pp. 163-177. J Caplan, 'Messengers of Cool'. *The Time*, October 17, 2005. M Rieckert, 'Coolhunting on the Web'. *The Age*, September 21, 2006. N Kerner and G Pressman, *Chasing Cool: Standing Out in Today's Cluttered Marketplace*, Atria Books, New York, 2007. P A Gloor and S M Cooper, *Coolhunting: Chasing Down the Next Big Thing*, Amacom, New York, 2007.

⁴ C Willis, *Bellwether*, Bantam Books, London, 1996. W Gibson, *Pattern Recognition*, Berkeley Publishing Group, New York, 2003.

⁵ N Klein, *No Logo: No Space, No Choice, No Jobs. Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies*, Flamingo, London, 2000. G McCracken, 'Hunting the Cool Hunt'. *CultureBy*, December 28, 2002 <http://www.cultureby.com/trilogy/2002/12/hunting_the_coo.html>. G McCracken, 'Who Killed the Cool Hunter?'. *CultureBy*, June 2, 2006 <http://www.cultureby.com/trilogy/2006/06/who_killed_the.html>.

⁶ M Pedroni, *Coolhunting. Genesi di una pratica professionale eretica [Coolhunting. Genesis of an heretical professional practice]*, FrancoAngeli, Milano, 2010.

⁷ G Lipovetsky, *The Empire of Fashion: Dressing Modern Democracy*, Princeton University Press, Princeton (NJ), 1994.

⁸ G Simmel, 'Fashion'. *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 62, May, 1957 [1904], p. 541-58. L A Fallers, 'A Note on the «Trickle Effect»'. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, vol. 18, 1954, p. 314-321.

⁹ D Crane, 'Diffusion Models and Fashion: A Reassessment'. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 566, 1999, p. 15.

¹⁰ G Lipovetsky, *The Empire of Fashion: Dressing Modern Democracy*, Princeton University Press, Princeton (NJ), 1994. P Volonté (ed), *La creatività diffusa. Culture e mestieri della moda oggi*, FrancoAngeli, Milano, p. 52-53.

¹¹ D Crane, 'Diffusion Models and Fashion: A Reassessment'. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 566, 1999, p. 17-18.

¹² S Saviolo and S Testa, *Le imprese del sistema moda. Il management al servizio della creatività*, Etas, Milano, 2005, p. 176-77.

¹³ P Volonté (ed), *La creatività diffusa. Culture e mestieri della moda oggi*, FrancoAngeli, Milano, p. 11.

¹⁴ See the websites <http://www.wgsn.com> and <http://thesartorialist.blogspot.com>.

¹⁵ See the websites <http://www.scienceofthetime.com> and <http://www.futureconceptlab.com>.

¹⁶ The notion of «field» crosses the whole work of Pierre Bourdieu. For a short but comprehensive overview, see P Bourdieu and L J D Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1992.

¹⁷ P Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1984, p. 318-71.

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