

Fashion and Sustainability: the aesthetics of upcycling and Mana Bernardes's design

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Abstract. *The new forms of production connected to the slow fashion movement have created an aesthetic that values the craft production, the singularity and the redesign of materials. That is the case of upcycling. Behind this new aesthetic there are some principles of sustainability, and the need of a new culture of consumption, which values social justice, human labour and environmental impact. This article aims to comprehend and explore the concept of slow fashion to counter the dominant model of the fashion business, the fast fashion. To do so, we begin with a literature review about the topic e presents a case study of the designer Mana Bernardes, who works with upcycled jewelry.*

Keywords. *Fashion design. Sustainability. Upcycling. Aesthetics. Mana Bernardes.*

1 Introduction

Contemporary society faces an environmental and economic crisis, which puts in questioning the entire productive, social and economic model nowadays. The oil crisis, the environmental problems e the social injustices of the neoliberal model have the organized society thinking about new alternatives and solutions. That is the particular case of design for sustainability, especially in its social and cultural innovation view.

The “mad alienation of mad in relation to nature and culture” (FLUSSER, 2013, p. 39) ¹ added to other factors took the fashion industry to an unsustainable situation, where people as much as the environment are slaved in the name of mass and cheap production and consumption, the fast fashion.

According to Manzini (2008), a break with the current ways of production, consumption and life style is necessary, valuing a new and sustainable way of thinking. The author points that this new way of thinking and acting will be obtain through “an widespread social learning process” (MANZINI, 2008, p. 19) ² and the systemic discontinuity of the current productive, social and economic logic. Every aspect of society must be influenced by these changes: physic, economic, institutional, ethic, aesthetic and cultural.

The first movement that emerged on the fashion industry to change the current mind set was the slow fashion, which aims to question e suggest new ways of producing and consuming which are closer to the

sustainability ideals. The upcycling, as one of the forms of slow fashion is one possibility, it aims to redesign and give new life – and value – to some materials which wore consider used or even trash. The upcycling has as one of its characteristics the reuse. And it's exactly on this aspect that this way of production takes part in sustainability, by prolonging the useful life of artefacts, redefining its value, e reintroducing them on the consumption cycle.

The slow fashion and the upcycling value craft and unique aesthetic, that opposes to the mass standard way of the fast fashion industry. Therefore, slow fashion integrates the set of strategies for the systemic discontinuity to sustainability, as defended by Manzini. In Brazil, one of the designers who works with upcycling is Mana Bernardes, she uses materials such as PET (Polyethylene terephthalate) bottles and hair clips to develop artefacts of high added value, particularly expressed by the degree of creativeness, and inventiveness presented.

2 Fashion and Culture for Sustainability

Defining fashion is not easy, since it can be understand from two points of view. The first one understand fashion as an industry and consumption, which involves multiple types of professionals, people and groups that aim to define identities. In this case, fashion is linked directly to the consumption of products itself (GODART, 2010).

The second definition of fashion is connected with the idea of specific social changes witch manifest

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beyond the clothes itself, in other aspects of social life. It is about changes that occur in constant periods, and that are not cumulative since they don't add nothing new, they just substitute the previous way (GODART, 2010).

On this article we focused on the second definition, fashion as social and behavioural changes. We understand that fashion has a social part much more important than the clothes itself, being a form of expression of the values of each society.

In the traditional fashion system logic products have a very short lifetime, since it is a system that values the present time, the ephemeral, what "is in or out" (LIPOVETSKY, 1989). In fact, the intention is exactly that nothing lasts a long time.

Other than the incentive to a fast and meaningless consumption the fashion industry is one of the biggest polluting in the world, thanks to the great number of chemicals involved and the great loss of water that occur in the course of the chain of production (GREENPEACE, 2011). These issues put fashion in the centre of the debate about sustainability, consumption and production.

When we talk about sustainable fashion there is a great contradiction mainly when we treat fashion from the perspective of the fast fashion and most capitalist model, in which case that it doesn't respect the limits of ethical behaviour towards the advances of society and culture, and even more towards the ability of the planet to recover, stimulating more consumption and dated practices.

In this context of fast consumption and disposable products we can perceive the fashion system as part of the cultural industry, mass scaled and alienated as putted by Adorno e Hockheimer (1985). Here the clothes appear just as a product with no bigger purposes than to feed the system itself, in a self centred process of overcoming limits. On the other hand, in a defying perspective we perceive other movements, which opposes the mainstream ways.

In reaction to the *status quo* of fast fashion new ways of doing and thinking fashion start to gain strength. That is the case of the slow fashion movement, which is inspired by the slow food movement and proposes a different system of fashion. Slow fashion values a sustainable way of thinking in the sense of "a new set of attitude and values which can minimize the impacts in society, as much towards the environmental issues as the social and economics issues" (MORELLI, 2010, p. 2)³.

So the slow fashion movement approaches every aspects of the fashion chain, since the ways of production, the human relations, and the environmental impacts, to a decrease of consumption. It is a systemic approach that worries with each pillar of the sustainability trio (social, environmental and economic, here we consider the cultural as well) at the same time that it worries about the whole system itself. That is a new paradigm for the fashion system, since it has to reinvent itself to attend to ethic criteria of production at the same time that it has to continue to be economically

viable since it continues to work in a capitalist economic system.

3 Fashion, Aesthetics and New Ideologies

Fashion is a complex phenomenon for the numerous connections with other fields of knowledge and practices. It involves topics of ethics, responsibility and especially of plans for the future. It represents and produces ideologies at the same time, translating a symbolic system through dressing, and use of accessories. At this point we can perceive fashions potential to innovate and creating new meanings.

Just like art, fashion is part of a cultural system, as taught by Geertz (1997) that goes much further then technical aspects like forms and colours. Through fashion it is possible to construct new perceptions and meanings to the world, just like an art piece does through its prerogatives. We can say that just as a art work is a cultural object, an accessory or a clothing piece as an object of human creation is able to create new meanings affecting sensibility and provoking subjective changes.

Fashion cannot be seen in a simplified way separates of other systems. But it can be comprehended as a field as defined by Bourdieu (1996) with its own set of *habitus*, a defined space that answers to a set of rules established buy individuals that are consider legitimate by the field itself. This means that fashion obey to certain rules that can be perceived even in the aesthetics of the products.

Nowadays the *status quo* of fashion is being questioned about its practices and ways of producing and consuming products, and new brands are being created with different values proposing to reuse and redefine materials. That new form of production is know as upcycling, "which means using an already used material or the residue of a product just as it was found, not putting any more energy on the reuse of it, without recycling the product. It is a process of recovery that transforms the wasted residues in new products or materials with superior quality and environmental value" (ANICET, *et al.*, 2011, p. 3)⁴.

Upcycle techniques usually result in a more exclusive and crafted work, much different then the one resulted of mass line production. It is not about just the reuse of the material but the new meaning attributed to it, it stops being something thrown away to be part of a product with high-attached value.

Slow fashion defied the field of fashion by proposing new and more sustainable ways of producing and consuming, new *habitus*. These new *habitus* are also expressed in a different aesthetic that values the unique, the crafted and the exclusive, and that found in despised materials a new meaning and a way of critic.

Upcycling is a technique that represents this new aesthetic of fashion where unusual and despised materials, as straws and clips, are added value. Doing this fashion shows its potential to be disruptive since it

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breaks off the established model of mass production, standardized and easily replicable, to a new, slower and personal way. It is a new *habitus* that emerges in the field of fashion closely linked to the ideas of sustainability.

Once again fashion comes close to art since it has a cultural part that incentives reflection and influences patterns of behaviour. It also assumes an important part of the pursue of sustainability since it proposes a more conscious way of consumption and a less ephemeral relation with the clothes in addition of rethinking processes and materials.

So if, as affirms Bourdieu, subjectivity, behaviour and habits are a historical construct, the upcycle as one of the representations of aesthetics of sustainability is also constructing a new type of consumption behaviour.

4 Case Study – Mana Bernardes's Upcycle

Mana Bernardes is a Brazilian artist and designer that designs pieces of jewelry using discarded things as material, such as ropes, hair clips and PET bottles. As other brands named after its founder, especially when they are alive, its practically impossible to disassociate the history and values of the brand and of the person.

Just like the products, the entire communication of the brand is designed to transmit a certain concept, the photography aims to project the product as an art piece. The artists' initiatives of social and environmental responsibility do not limit to the product. In addition to her work as a designer, Mana Bernardes is involved in multiple social and environmental causes, giving speeches and courses in poor communities, universities and scientific events.

The designer/ artist also developed a line of flip flops in cobranding with the Brazilian shoe company Ipanema Shoes, and another project with Brazilian retail chain of home products Tok Stok.



Figure 1. Produtos Mana Bernardes. From: Site Mana Bernardes (2017)

In 2011, Mana Bernardes received the Top Design 21 award for best package for the PET capsule she designed to pack her jewelry.



Figure 2. PET Capsule. From: Site Mana Bernardes (2017)

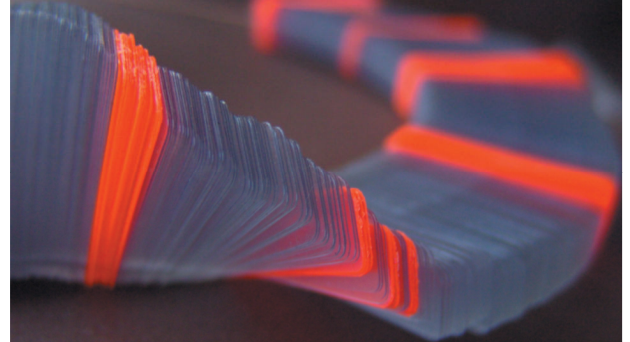


Figure 3. Mana Bernardes's Concept Image. From: Site Mana Bernardes (2017)

At the artist website we could perceive the treasure that the images suggest. Sustainability is an intrinsic characteristic since she chooses to work with “no value” material as PET bottles and straws that are redesigned and redefined to become products of high-attached value.

5 Results

The analysis done in this paper were build on the literature review about strategic design and sustainability, particularly Manzini's concept of systemic discontinuity. Considering the symbolic dimension present on the artist-designer's work, a link with semiotics made possible for us to do a reading and interpretation of the signs and language involved in her work. A close look of the language presented in the photography, as well as the perception about the materials used and the symbolic context of the actions of the designer herself, were focused of the analysis here presented. Also the perception of the analogies, metonymys and metaphors helped us to comprehend the use of materials, as well as the redetermination of common materials like straws and tooth picks used along side with noble materials like gold, made possible to identify an aesthetic game in the construction of the marketing sense of the proposed work. Thus, a methodology of qualitative and exploratory bias was configured and enabled us to construct a critical and at the same time constructive look at the thematic, concepts and the upcycling movement as a whole, which is justified by the transformation of the context of fashion and culture in the perspective of sustainability.

Awarded multiple times, Mana Bernardes is an agent with legitimacy in the field of fashion. She is able so to subvert and create new aesthetics standards altering the established *habitus*.

Some questions may be brought up about the way the designer materialize the concept of upcycle since the materials she use in some cases (like toothpicks) probably haven't been used before.

However it's undeniable that her work is quiet representative of the new aesthetic that we discussed in this paper. The artist opposes to the established perception of value of materials combining extremely ordinary things with noble ones like gold. Adding up to her creativity and unusual materials, Mana still uses great photography to build the image of the products as luxury and distinguished on her marketing campaigns. Doing so she gives a new meaning to the objects, turning hair clips, straws and toothpicks into art and something to desire.

In fact, Mana Bernardes helps to construct a new aesthetic representation align to the sustainability ideals. Her pieces are fashion products as comprehended by Godart, vehicles of representation of behaviour changes to a new model of society that values the crafted, the unique and the fair.

6 Final Considerations

The need of new paths for fashion can be noticed by the great amount of papers and work dedicated to it, as in academic works as in companies and new brands. However, fashion is a reflection of behaviours, desires and aspirations as so any new *habitus* created will have to attend to aesthetic and aspirational goals.

Upcycle contributes on this context by creating a new aesthetic representation that are at the same time desirable and of less environmental impact. In addition it has a potential to critic the way materials are perceived, that transform from trash to luxury.

In a slow but steady movement we can observe that fashion, through agents that have the symbolic power to do so, begin to accept and embrace the aesthetic of upcycle and sustainability, since more companies, magazines and important designers add them to their speeches.

By using the case of Mana Bernardes this paper aimed to show how disruptive and questioning fashion can be at the same time that it has to survive in an extremely competitive market. Challenging the established ways of doing, creating new patterns and giving new meaning to usually discarded material fashion takes an important part to a sustainable world. It stimulates a different culture of consumption that pays attention to the society struggles in face of the negative effects of the predatory industry.

Fashion can create and give strength to a new, conscious, and environmental responsible aesthetic, and doing so it can be part of the process of social learning and systemic discontinuities in behalf of a sustainable way of thinking and acting.

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