The Curse of the Fashion Destination
By Göran Sundberg

Introduction

This paper investigates a personal experience of misrepresentation and lack of direction in the current fashion culture. Through a theoretic framework, lifted from Jean Baudrillard’s *System of Objects*, it shows how a failure in addressing societal ambivalences can be explained by a severed condition of seriality, and a subsequent loss of time and personality. The emotional dimensions of these issues are explored through experimental writing and formal experiments. The findings point to strategies that work, in a parallel motion from abstraction, counteracting the systematization of industrial objects. Within the context of post-structural theory, the text discusses the potential for pre-exhaustive, ad-valuating and dating actions in design. And, in conjunction with the adjoining exhibition piece, this project is also setting out to explore an alternative fashion discourse.
For a year or so, I have been overcome by a feeling of emptiness. It is not the kind of desolation you would associate with, say, an abandoned holiday destination in the month of October. Nor is it the feeling of “What now?” that usually comes after a massive effort, in the wake of all the feelings, fears and hopes that were invested in such large amounts.

Instead, this sentiment, this state of mind, could also be described as a void. Like, to continue on the metaphors, how you would paradoxically feel in the crowding and clamour at a package tour destination in the high season. Where you, despite the activities, the games and the consumption, have a chafing feeling of pointlessness. Where perhaps the people and the noise just underline the fact that it is all just empty – empty as in a lack of meaning.

This feeling of emptiness-meaninglessness has made me mildly depressed. As a designer you constantly look for problems to solve and conventions to upset, and there is rarely a shortage of ideas or potential projects to embark upon. Still, it has been difficult to shake that chafing feeling and a lack of energy resembling the state of fatigue that may come with the first stages of depression.

In this state, there is also something in the simile of the tour destination: fashion has for some time been very much like the popular spot at the height of the season. From being virtually non-existent in general media and high culture for decades (during the very low season if you follow the comparison), it is now everywhere. Some suggest clothes culture has taken over from music as the chosen expression of a generation.

But for me, there has been a void of meaning, hence my feeling of emptiness. And it isn't just me. Ironically, as I am finally coming to terms with my negative moods, I get a confirmation from the academic world in the shape of a new article:

“Fashion has just become fashion and repetitively refers to itself instead of nourishing our cultures and contributing to the evolution of our civilizations. Fashion has been losing its strong symbolism, its systems of signs and signifiers, its meaning and its messages. Miles of cloth are getting swallowed up by the rhetoric of fashion emptiness.” (see Carbonaro and Votava, 2009:44).

For some time there has been a void of what, for example, happened in the 1970's and early 1990's respectively, when punk and grunge fashion were very influential counterculture movements. Both movements appeared in the times of economic recessions, when young people felt at odds with the predominant glitz in music and clothing. Or, as another example, when women started to occupy seats in the corporate boardrooms, and power suits and shoulder pads gave these fresh female executives means to dress that would bridge the ambivalence between their old and new roles. Or when men and their changing gender roles resulted in such recent inventions as the male decolletage and an uninhibited use of pastel colours.

At each of these instants, fashion supplied an expression for the general ambivalence, a tool or even a weapon for cultural changes. And it is not only that these expressions have been missing today: we all share a very important problem that fashion so very obviously has failed to address in a convincing manner.
What fashion has failed to channel of late is a complex and fundamental issue: the interrelated state of consumer culture, the economic system and the catastrophic effects on the human habitat.

The causes for fashion's failure to address these issues are multifold, but perhaps the most obvious reason is fashion's current role as the quintessential product of the consumer culture. Instead of signifying anything that really relates to the ambivalences of the changing society, fashion is selling dreams of a glamourous past to an ever-growing number of middle class consumers, the so-called masstige product offer (mass market prestige, see definition in Carbonaro and Votava, 2009:44). And, as in my depressing tour destination, this masstige fashion may be arranged to have a lively and exiting appearance, but in the end it is not offering more than a dream from the past, of a time when the imitated offering was luxury and stood for craft and prosperity. Today, the products are just pastiches of luxury and not much else.

It is true that the fashion market today has no shortage of products that are organic, green or anything beginning with “eco”. However, these qualities or product aspects are never central to the product's status as a fashion product (if it is a fashion item, at all). More often than not, this will entail some sort of sacrifice from the main function of the object. Usually, the eco-label works more as an excuse for the marketing of the masstige product, a mere marketing opportunity, targeted towards a consumer who already has mixed emotions about the products of meaningless fashion. In fact, it comes across as hypocrisy: an environmentally friendly pretence while still advocating an increase of consumption.

But perhaps the mendacity of eco-consumerism may work as an impulse for a contemporary fashion? A vital expression that indeed elaborates around a real ambivalence? I envision a revenge from the nature that will not conform to false solutions just because such a solution would suit a society based on consumerism. From my point of view of the package tour, I imagine the tourist destination being haunted by enraged beings from a time before the place was converted to meaningless fun and games, somewhat like how the young and arrogant filmmakers of *The Blair Witch Project* meet a gruelling fate in the woods. Suddenly my spirits lift considerably.

I believe the return of creative energy stems from a yearning for more radicalism than the eco-products the market system has come up with, as the latter do not represent a satisfying solution to our current dilemma. They are, to quote popular theory on sustainability and system leverage intervention, like “arranging the deck chairs on the Titanic” (see Meadows, 1999:6). The real enemy of sustainability may instead be what Madge describes as the habit of mind that is dominated by the culture of consumption, that is, always wanting the next “thing”, even if that thing is environmentally better then the preceding thing (see Madge in Highmore, 2009:50).

This may have a resounding aspect to anyone familiar with Baudrillard's writing on objects and consumption (see Baudrillard, 1996:155). It is, indeed, the starting point of the research into this subject: the relationship between the fashion object and time and reality.
Objects that are as ephemeral as words

“Everything is in movement, everything shifts before our eyes, everything is continually being transformed – yet nothing really changes.”

(see Baudrillard, 1996:155)

It seems we are living in a culture that increasingly provides proof of the post-structuralist idea of objects as signs. And of objects that are external to any real relationship; they may only signify a relationship. These sign-objects thus become arbitrary but derives their meaning from the system of all the other sign-objects, and of their respective difference.

Thus, the function of the sneakers many people wear in today's cities, are not necessarily to perform in a sport's competition, but to represent the wearer's relation to running (or any sports related activity). They are chosen, as a personal choice, because of the differences these sneakers have in relation to thousands of other sneakers.

As a result, we have huge multinational companies like Nike that do not manufacture sneakers (that particular activity is delegated to a number of interchangeable subcontractors in Indonesia) – they create differences and signs, and market them in the shape of sneakers.

It is those signs, not the shoes, that are being consumed and at an increasing speed – because it is possible and because it is necessary. If the consumption of signs is the basis of the life project in the culture of industrial production, the acceleration of consumption is the logical consequence, as these signs never represent reality but still are presented as to fill a void in the life project.

Hence the sign-object is also placed outside of any real dimension of time or history. It may reference “history” among an indefinite number of references, but do not have an authentic history in time connected to human life. Instead, the place in time for the sign-object is a sort of belated present, what Baudrillard calls “the equivalent in time of suburban impersonality in space” (see Baudrillard, 1996:152).

It is in this time-space where objects succeed each other until they are as ephemeral as words. Everything shifts and is being transformed, yet nothing is really changing. It is a system that allows for the signification of any revolution, but not for any real revolution.

The void that is being perceived is therefore twofold: the absence of reality, and the change or revolution that is necessary today.

An experience of body and time

The sensation of the body in the room, the now, is taking over the senses. The hearing and sensory organs focus on being. Breathing, pulse, gravitation, what is registered by the body exists in conjunction with the entire surrounding – maybe because of the entire surrounding, as everything is connected and as nothing can exist in isolation. It is a moment that is expanding, without beginning or end. Preceding moments are forgotten. Succeeding moments will be another being.

This being is a nucleus which is given its place in the room, and a place in time, by all the charged particles that is surrounding it, and all the particles that itself is surrounding. The room is defined by the
The tragedy of the denim jeans

Following the above, a strong association with time and history may be the escape from the limbo of the belated present of sign-objects. This query is here viewed from the perspective of the relation between the subject and the object, and the potential for empathy (see Chapman, 2005). The reasoning proceed as follows:

The subject is constantly changing and developing through experience. It is maturing and ageing. A static object, on the other hand, is what it is from the moment of purchase plus, perhaps, a set of devaluating scratches — devaluating, if the design value is maximised in the brand new, unused, state.

However, empathy between subject and object may develop through time, in the way a child creates an emotional bond with a teddy bear. This bond of empathy grows stronger no matter how dirty and torn the teddy is becoming — but probably because the teddy is becoming dirty and torn, thus showing the signs of use and the passing of time.

Another way to develop empathy is through interaction. An adult may create this bond with, for instance, a car that is used through important passages of life and maintained through repair work. A further example is a plant that is being nurtured and grows, and in that also mirrors the subject's development and maturing.

Many objects are not designed for such use, or for developing bonds with the subject. Most electronic gizmos are offered as objects that are surpassing a previous generation in technology and design and, inevitably, will shortly be surpassed by the next generation of gizmos. In that capacity, these objects have no incentives for empathy.

In addition, these objects are also optimized in the unused state: sleek surfaces of brushed metal or shiny plastic are seductive in their
utopian unblemished state. As soon as the first sets of scratches appear, unavoidably, the object loses its utopian and seductive quality.

Waste, as one of the final stages in a product cycle, can therefore be a symptom of expired empathy. The teddy bear will resist this stage because of the amount of empathy that has been built up through childhood years, the electronic gizmo less so.

In the field of fashion, there is one category of objects that historically has carried the potential for subject-object sympathy, and functioned as a carrier of history and time: the denim jeans.

Many people can testify to the teddy bear-like relationship with a certain pair of jeans. Tellingly, they are described as a piece of garment that became better with time, constantly reaching new heights of improvement, until the day the pants were virtually falling apart. Such relationships are also telling in that the subsequent separations are accompanied with an authentic feeling of mourning.

The are several reasons why such a relationship may develop: Firstly, the material of the jeans, with the “bleeding” indigo dye makes the object develop and age, in tune with its subject, in an aesthetically pleasing way. Secondly, wearing and washing the jeans makes them slowly adapt to the body of the subject and become more comfortable and soft through the process. Thirdly, this process also allows the pair of jeans to start incorporating signs and clues of the history which the subject and object are sharing: the worn silhouette of the wallet in the back pocket, the tear at the knee from the skateboard accident, paint from decorating a first home. In addition, the denim jeans invites interaction in mending and customization.

Tragically, this emphatic relationship is no longer what it was. The qualities that made the object so fit for a historic use, are now being pastiched in production: through many complicated procedures jeans are coming ready-washed, ready-torn, ready-softened with pastiches of personalizations. They often have factory-made mendings, spills, and imitated traces of bodies and other objects.

In a post-structural point of view, the jeans are no longer unique objects with relations to the subject, but sign-objects with a certain set of personalizations out of an indefinite number of differentiations to chose from.

Therefore the denim jeans are now, on a systematic level, banished to the belated present, out of history. That is their tragedy.

**Initial inquiries into time and reality**

**1. Registering usage**

A pair of white jeans was bought in June. The length of the legs was altered to fit better, with the result of a subtle difference in stitching at the hem. Then, during the following months, the jeans were worn every day (with the exception for washing) to allow for traces of usage, relationship and of history. The result was documented after 100 days of wearing, after washing in illustration 1.

The permanent traces are subtle. Still, it is possible to detect discolouring at the pocket were change is carried, traces from sitting
on the floor at a techno festival, and from a pair of new brown leather boots. Street grime has stuck permanently to the inside of the hem.

The wearing-ageing process of the jeans started off by a oscillation between states of clean to dirty, back to clean again. Taking the trousers out of the washing machine, curious about the result, was almost reminiscent of a television ad: a bright white and spotless result, again and again. When the first permanent marks appeared, it caused some initial dismay and fear of the garment being devalued. But following this, the interest in the development of the garment and the search for characteristics, took over. During this process, expectations were never really met: 100 days do not seem enough for developing truly distinctive marks, or to grow an empathic relationship.

2. Patination of fabrics

Different qualities of fabrics are washed and patinated with textile paint and crayons, documented in illustration 2.
A “soiling” with textile paint becomes very prominent and is easily appearing as a “pattern”. A “dirtying” technique gives an authentic looking result that also enhances the textile texture.

Although “dirtying” and “soiling” techniques are not (yet) established pastiches of history and reality, like washing and tearing are in the denim sector, they are close to such readings. Similar treatments have been used before, like in designer Helmut Lang’s burnt jeans. Changing the context can avoid such connections – for instance, in using the techniques on dress up-items such as suitings and shirtings. But overall, a subtle use to give objects more of a character is preferable to giving the object a (more or less) banal difference – a difference in the post-structural meaning.

3. **Lubricating leather**

Different types of leathers are treated with mink oil (vegetable tanned leather) or pigmented shoe polish (mineral tanned leather). See illustration 3.

![Illustration 3: Lubricated leathers.](image)

The natural vegetable leather show initial discolourings that diminish after time. The vegetable tanned leather that has acquired a brown tint hold that discolouring much better. The shoe polish on mineral tanned leather has more of a “dirtying” effect.

In this context, the lubrication of the leathers is more useful as a technique in that it has no close comparison – or even would work well at all – as a pastiche. Lubricating is also an act of enhancing the object. In addition, lubrication has an inherent meaning of manual labour and time spent doing it.

The discolouring effect of lubrication (on the tinted varieties of nappa) results in a “pre-exhaustion” of devaluation through use, in the way that there is no difference between an utopian, ideal state of the object, and the object being used. In this aspect, the “dirtying” and “soiling” techniques are comparable.
Pre-exhaustive strategies

The pre-exhaustive strategy would primarily function as a means to transform an object that is potentially destined for the limbo of the belated present, to an object that can age. The strategy can be considered as pre-starting that process, or to disqualify its utopian or idealistic potential.

Let's consider this potential from the perspective of Baudrillard's systematic and abstract division of objects into models and series. This division, that truly appeared with the birth of industrial production of consumer goods, is the basis of the creation of the sign-object (see above).

A model is the sole object available, with no varieties to chose from, either because of the social construction it appears in, or as a work of art (or a haute couture item in fashion). The serial object, on the other hand, is created and marketed as an alternative styling among many other objects, as a lifestyle choice. Thus, it is not the main function that defines the object, as in a model, but its difference in relation to other sign-objects. Characteristically, these differences never contribute to the use-value of the object, but make the garment less warm, less comfortable and less durable in the pursuit of difference. The difference therefore becomes a parasitic value.

According to this system, models are unique objects where only subtle differentiations cause a distinction: "It is the heft, hardiness, grain or "warmth" of a material whose presence or absence serves as a marker of difference. Such tactile characteristics are close to the most profound defining qualities of the model – far more so than the visual values of colour and form, which are more easily transposed to series because they are better suited to the needs of marginal differentiation." (see Baudrillard, 1996:137).

Such arguing would confirm the conclusion from the experiment, above: An overt use of soiling would merely create another set of serial differentiations, whereas a very subtle use or lubrication could add to the vital quality of the material. The preliminary criteria would be if the pre-exhausting strategy is visible and the basis of the judgement of the subject. Or if the action is only adding a subtle, less conspicuous, quality to the object. And, mainly, if the strategy eradicates the difference between a new, utopian state and the down grading the first signs of use could create.

On anti-seriality

Following the pre-exhaustive logic, above, there are multiple options in fashion design to create a subtle quality of history and of a cancelled utopian state: a mismatched stitch to cancel the impact of a re-made hem, a discreetly placed spot that pre-empty the effect of the first permanent mark, or a mismatched button to forestall the more or less inevitable loss and replacement of an original button. The latter is subsequently tried out in a shirt, in illustration 4.

The result is, not surprisingly, analogous to the textiles experiments above: it may be a subtle quality of an undefinable state. Or a banal difference, if it is made too conspicuously in placement, colour, size or material and hence a serial difference.
The deciding criteria is highly contextual and relational. Beside the multiple design parameters, the manipulation is also relying on the references of the clothing object itself, and on compositions, and how the item is being worn. But the differences, result and effect is nonetheless unambiguous.

Although a possible strategy, following Baudrillard's reasoning, there may also be alternative strategies to avoid seriality. Consider, for example, the systematic division in the intention of objects: the serial object is constituted with parasitic values in trying to present itself as a model, something special. The pure model (if it were to exist) on the other hand would distinguish itself through just being what it is, without trying to distinguish itself through intentional differences as there are no other objects to differentiate from (perhaps is this the accurate description of the denim jeans, as it were before its industrial tragedy).

Following this, the question is whether it is possible to design an object that is not intentionally different (“a classic with a twist”, as it is popularly known in fashion lingo) but instead conceived as a kind of archetypical object. And, if so, to what degree this object can present itself as a fashion object. And, in addition, what its place will be in relation to other fashion objects. This will have to be subjects for further experiments in the framework of this research.

To continue on the logic of the archetypical anti-serial object, the next step would be to try out actions that are not parasitic values, but additions or differences that are solely conceived to enhance the use: ad-valuing additions. Again, it is not difficult to imagine such additions, for instance in the shape of enforcing leather patches on elbows and knees, or strips of leather to reinforce parts of garments that are subject to heavy usage, like hems and cuffs.

This kind of detail is in fact traditionally found on knitted sweaters. But what will happen if such reinforcing additions are put on dressed up items like shirts or suit trousers? In the context of the current fashion, this will in some senses work as a differentiation, but a differentiation that actually contributes to the user value of the object. Again, this will have to be subject to practise based research, but in essence, the differentiation that intend to contribute user value does not, in itself nor as an initial outset, present a logical contradiction.

**Dating a shirt**

**Following the reasoning** above, it would also make sense to address and test the temporal conclusion of the industrial seriality: “the equivalent in time of suburban impersonality in space”. Although an abstract concept, the representer (or victim) of this state is indeed a very material object.

To address the combined issue of “impersonality” and “time”, a clothing label was created where the name of the intended wearer is noted, as well as the date of conception and the maker. The label is pictured in illustration 5.

The label does work as an agent of transformation. In a manner similar to name-tagging children's clothing, the garment becomes a personal item, in contrast to the more impersonal item supplied with a
traditional trademark. The “made to order” character of the shirt implies a more careful selection and fitting than a mass produced garment.

Even though the difference between the two statuses is evident, it is not a transformation that unambiguously leads to an objectively “higher” value, as the personalization may have its pros and cons; it lends a higher degree of intimacy in relation to its wearer at the expense of its independence as an object. To the extent that the object should be traded or, if a fashion item should act as a manifestation of a more glamorous self for anyone, the connection to one person is counteractive. However, it is effective as a placement in space and time.

Dating is also an act of limiting a potential universality, and putting it firmly in time and history. Whereas an undated item may, if only potentially, be presented as a contemporary object at any point in time, the shirt with a conception date is fixed to that day.

But the real result may be found in the context of a second hand store. This trading place act as a poignant manifestation of the end for all serial objects, continuously filling up with a never-ending sequence of garments out of time.

The dated shirt, however, is conditioned for a special category of second hand clothing (providing its accomplishment of other criteria, such as quality and style): the vintage piece.

Conclusion
Bye-bye, Baudrillard

However accurate the post-structuralist system works to identify and contextualize the symptoms of the current misrepresentation in fashion, an incongruity seems to appear when considering Baudrillard’s location of the fashion function. In his system of objects, it is a secondary seriality, when serial personalizations themselves becomes mass produced in serial form (see Baudrillard, 1996:142).

Admittedly, it is not difficult to imagine the fashion that is being referred to within this system – in fact, this fashion is precisely the clamour experienced in the symbolic holiday destination (see introduction above). But this is not the fashion this text has set out in search for. In many senses it is instead the anti-thesis of the secondary seriality.

Certainly, this difference in meaning is a question of definition, and a difference in understanding of what fashion is and what fashion can be. In that sense, the divergence represents an – as of yet – unanswered query that is evident also in the article by Carbonaro and Votava. Perhaps there is no room for this fashion in the system of objects. But it is possible that the aim of this text is the naïve urge to change or revolutionize the system itself.

For that reason, it is perhaps time to leave the post-structuralist system of objects. But the depart would not be caused by the arrival at a terminus, where the rails laid down by Baudrillard ends, and where alternative modes of transportation are needed. Instead the departure would come from the level of perfect abstraction in this system, leading to its inevitable and unavoidable destiny in the perpetual
discharge from a reality principle (see Baudrillard, 1996:204).

It seems now that the efforts and the suggested strategies above all strive to leave this very limbo of the belated objects, to move towards reality (in placing the object in time, place and making it personal). And, as these objects are replaced from the impersonality towards specificity, there is a parallel movement from the abstraction of the post-structural system towards an alternative destination. What remains to see, is if this other place is possible, or if it is the urge to leave that is paramount, in itself.

So, at this point, there are no further roads for reasoning, no evident structure to explore or test. It is time to join the unruly spirits of the holiday destination, to listen to the beings that do not succumb to a society of fun and games, and of emptiness. It is time to try moving into being, to an existence that in fact has a place in time and place, in infinity.

The ghosts of time

Suddenly they were here. No-one saw them coming, and no-one knows where they are from. Like they were always here, from ancient times, in a coinciding dimension. They roam the streets, rarely alone, mostly in groups, sometimes in gangs. Moving but, at the same time, just present. Some believe that they will do harm, and some are sure they are violent, but no-one can swear to it. “Maybe they just want to scare us away” some people say, and maybe they do. “The unusual can seem scary” the sensible say, and maybe it can.

But to see their slender silhouettes is to see ghosts. You can only catch a glimpse of their pale faces, under the wide brimmed hats and behind the long hair, falling onto shoulders. They are either very young, or very old, just as their clothes look new, but at the same time very old. Their coats and slim trousers are difficult to place in a time, as they have never been seen before. Neither dressed up, nor in rags, but like well used tools; oiled, tainted and repaired.

Rain and wind and tear

The naked silhouettes of leafless trees
A smell of earth and wet grass
The decay in the cycle of ancient minds

“What do they want?” we ask. Perhaps they do not want anything, perhaps just to exist – the will to live inherent in all being. For no-one has heard them speak. But there is a sound in the wind, like the creaking of a tree and the screeching of a bird, and you just know they are here.
References


Illustrations

1. Details of jeans worn 100 days. Photo: Göran Sundberg 2009
2. Patinated textiles. Photo: Göran Sundberg 2009
3. Lubricated leather. Photo: Göran Sundberg 2009
4. Mismatched button on shirt. Photo: Göran Sundberg 2009
5. Made to order label on shirt. Photo: Göran Sundberg 2009
6. Outfit on scarecrow. Photo: Göran Sundberg 2009