

Uncovering the Dialectics of Fashion and Luxury in Walter Benjamin's Arcades Project

Eliot Eklöv

Centre of Fashion Studies, Stockholm University

eliot.eklow@gmail.com

Abstract

In collecting, close-reading and analysing each paragraph and note concerning fashion from Walter Benjamin's Arcades Project, I reconstruct Benjamin's dialectical model of fashion and the luxury commodity. This theoretical model provides us with an essential understanding of luxury consumption, excess in modern consumerism, and the global fashion industry.

Benjamin's the Arcades Project might, as noted by Wilson (2003), seem as a nebulous collection of aphorisms. In gathering the loose ends and fragments, however, it is possible to comprehend the scope and key insights of Benjamin's study of fashion. Following Buck-Morss' *The Dialectics of Seeing* (1989), Benjamin's work is often associated with visuality; as this paper emphasises Benjamin's writing on fashion, the focus instead shifts toward the dialectical thought-image (Denkbild), the aphorism, the phantasmagoria and allegory.

With this scope, Benjamin's emblematic dialectical pairings of Woman and Commodity vis-à-vis Desire and the Corpse, previously discussed by Evans (2007) as well as by Lehmann (2000), opens for an essential theory for conceptualising the commodity fetishism of luxury consumption and excess in a time of advancing global markets.

Benjamin's unorthodox materialist approach – part philosophical, part poetical, both and yet neither, as Arendt states of Benjamin's *Illuminations* (1969) – in the Arcades Project puts the spotlight on luxury goods and fashion paraphernalia rather than on utilitarian commodities and machines. Benjamin illuminates each trace of Parisian 19th century luxury fetishism – silk handkerchiefs and magasins de nouveautés, mirrors and mannequins – as dialectical flash images, each pairing organised into greater schemata. These, as 'dialectical turning-points,' give rise to a greater synthesis through a process of 'upheaval' (Hegel's *Aufhebung*). In the dialectic of street and salon, as it gives rise to the Parisian arcade and its fashion boutiques, Benjamin locates "the last refuge of the commodity," divulging the paradoxical essence of luxury as the fleeting core of modernity.

Keywords

Modernity, luxury commodity, dialectical images, philosophy of fashion, aesthetic theory.