

MICHELLE LEE (2003), *FASHION VICTIM: OUR LOVE-HATE RELATIONSHIP WITH DRESSING, SHOPPING AND THE COST OF STYLE*, NEW YORK: BROADWAY BOOKS

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Michelle Lee, a New-Yorker fashion journalist wrote a book entitled: *Fashion Victim: Our Love-Hate Relationship with Dressing, Shopping, and the Cost of Style*.

After reading the book, we can easily conclude that it is not a prescription book about how to be *in* or *out* in terms of fashion; it is not a shopping guide-book of secret places which are unknown to the vast majority, nor is it a guide filled with suggestions about what not to wear. The author focuses on the feminine obsession for fashion and style, which feeds a worldwide millionaire industry, by stating that “We’re crazy about fashion... literally. Rational people are driven to near lunacy in their pursuit of style” (2003: X) and that, one way or another, “We are all slaves to fashion...(...)” (2003: XI). Although we all know people who believe they are not influenced by fashion and that, by no means, feel overpowered by it, they are still exposed to a multiplicity of messages that, in some way, dictate what they choose to wear.

In order to provide the framework to this theme, Michelle Lee addresses our relationship with fashion in a very pertinent way, and the way we somehow have become its “slaves”, the behaviour of its victims, the fashion for trends and its implications, both for the consumers, and for the industry, to be or not to be *cool*, style, the need for *status* and the power given to us by clothes, the cult of the socialite and of celebrities, the quick chic, the *Outlet* phenomenon, *fast-fashion*, the disposability and the standardization of fashion, the love-hate conflicting relationship that fashion victims have with trends, fashion’s relationship with art and its increasing connection with the greatest market where the daily life of a fashion designer is ever more measured according to the profits that can be brought to the brands he/she works for.

The author states: “By most accepted definitions, a Fashion Victim is someone who follows trends slavishly, a person who is not necessarily captivated by the beauty of a new garment so much as by the mere novelty of it and the social standing it conveys” (2003: XI). Does the victim buy what she/he likes? We guess not. Magazines dictate what is *in* and what is *out*. They constitute some kind of guide; they love to look at the fashion editorials and observe all the novelties fresh out of the catwalks; they observe what the socialite, the *pos-stars*, and the celebrities wear and they are absolutely convinced that by acquiring certain items, they will get a free pass to the magical realm of power. She/he may not have the ideal body for a particular item of clothing, but what is seen in magazines is idealized, because it is expensive, because people around know it is expensive, because she/he believes it will grant her *status* and give them confidence. To a fashion victim, everything which is trendy is a must-have, nothing will be missed, and her/

his wardrobe displays a profusion of items, accessories and footwear. They own a huge amount of garments and most of the times they don't even get to wear them.

Rather than consuming according to the product's functionality, items will be purchased in terms of what they represent, and their significance will acquire a decisive importance, in both the personal sphere and in social circumstances. Thus, a fashion victim ends up being a consumer of the *status* conferred by the objects, and a personification of the objects themselves. We all know people that worry about sustainable development and social responsibility at the level of ideas, but when they are about to purchase a certain item, they cannot control that urge; they cannot perceive that they will become accomplices in that process. It is obvious that, in a certain way, we are all accomplices.

Michelle Lee sums up the universe of fashion victims in 10 commandments.

In the first commandment, Michelle Lee states: "Thou Shalt Pay More to Appear Poor" (2003: 1). We are aware that all clothes undergo a series of transformations in order to look worn when they are bought, that is, they must not look new. Hence, the author sarcastically raises the following question: if what we wear is a way of showing what we are, why then does one want to convey that no effort whatsoever was made at the time we had to make that decision?.

The second commandment dictates: "Thou Shalt Covet Useless Utility" (2003: 4). A fashion victim is known to acquire items of clothing not according to their function, not in terms of what she/he needs, but for one simple reason, for the fun of simply getting it. Nonetheless, she/he always finds a reasonable explanation for purchasing that particular item, and that explanation is directly linked with need.

In the third commandment, the author writes: "Thou Shalt Own Minutely Differing Variations of the Same Thing" (2003: 5). In other words, for a fashion victim to own relatively similar items that quite often she/he won't even wear, does not constitute a problem, but a necessity. It is about living a constantly renewed and seductive fashion, which enables her/him to constantly inhabit a brand new "universe". It is important to emphasise that everything is experimented in the enjoyment of the present moment and, in that sense, the fashion victim "(...) is willing to put up with some financial pain to experience some fashion pleasure" (2003: 47). She/He is obviously unaware that style cannot be bought in a shop, let alone elegance.

Regarding the fascination for brands, according to the fourth commandment: "Thou Shalt Believe Submissively in the Fashion Label's Reach" (2003: 6). Brands have a stabilizing dimension; we trust everything in them; there is an osmosis between ourselves and them; the dreamt universe of all that is missing in our relationship with the other. In our consumerist fantasy, brands come to life; they possess a personality and 'exude' *sex-appeal*. What charms us are not the peculiarities of brands, but what they mean; the happiness "capital" they add to our continuously changing existence. We do not offer any kind of resistance to brands, and allow them to influence us; we let ourselves be seduced by a countless number of promises. Brands symbolize security stability, caution and sense of belonging. The trade mark is, above all, a conviction. All lies in the intangibility of brands. Intangibility materialised in fantasy, in emotion, in dream, to sum up,

in the imaginary and in the immaterial, it 'gains ground' before the tangible aspects of products.

Michelle Lee states in the fifth commandment: "Thou Shalt Require Validation of Thine Own Stylishness" (2003: 8). In the author's opinion, despite the fact that we enjoy thinking that the way we dress is an extension of what we are, it is important to stress that, in line with Goffman, the "I" is essentially social. It is around others, and based on their response towards him that the individual will form an idea about himself. We are aware that in social interaction the individual possesses a set of masks that he will use depending on the type of audience he faces in a certain situation. One should also take into account that in the self-representation process, the fact that one displays a certain characteristic is as vital as effectively owning it.

In the sixth commandment, the author underlines: "Thou Shalt Dress Vicariously Through Thy Children and Pets" (2003: 10). Along the same line, Michelle Lee writes that fashion victims do not settle for wearing the very latest, but they are simultaneously committed to sharing that passion with their children and pets. This ritual accompanies them. We know that luxury brands, for example, are investing in children lines and in animal accessories. If nowadays one cannot do without a *personal trainer*, one cannot forget that for a fashion victim, the *personal dog* is an essential need for his/her pets?

In the seventh commandment, Michelle Lee states: "Thou Shalt Feign Athleticism" (2003: 11). For the author, great financial investments have been made in sportswear, and in this particular case, in tennis shoes, which are becoming more and more versatile as far as their efficiency and comfort are concerned. However, when a fashion victim purchases them, "these supersneakers, he is delighted over his purchase and can't wait to wear them when he meets his buddies for a drink, no doubt at the local sports bar" (2003: 12).

The eighth commandment states: "Thou Shalt Be a Walking Billboard" (2003: 12). According to the author, we acknowledge that, frequently, there is no need to flaunt certain logos, since the type of clothing displays typical characteristics of a particular trade mark, and reveals the wearer's dress style.

In the ninth commandment, the author underlines: you should observe the way the Socialite and celebrities dress. (2003). From Paris to Milan, every Haute Couture house is eager to dress them. Fashion magazine covers give them more and more space, thus, they become powerful role-models in terms of fashion. They may have a reputation for dressing more or less tastefully; they may have more or less style but, still, they trigger a certain kind of mimicry in the fashion victim. According to the author, fashion victims will fall under the spell of these celebrities and socialites and consume their photos, "(...) knowing little about who these people are except that they're in a magazine, they're rich, and they're incredibly well dressed" (2003: 15). This will grant celebrities certain advantages because it is a way of promoting brands but, above all, it is an opportunity of gaining media coverage and, knowing the effects of mimicry, an entourage of legionnaires will imitate them.

Tenth commandment: "Thou Shalt Want without Seeing" (2003: 16). Selling clothes does not imply, as it did in the past, having to show them. *Branding* manipulates

products, in order to change them into concepts, lifestyles and experiences. All advertising campaigns are geared towards that goal.

The author focuses succinctly on the life cycle of trends and states that “We live in the era of Speed Chic” (my translation) (2003: 33). In other words, we live in such an accelerated society that trends are replaced by others at an astonishing pace. And as consumers, we resemble the White Rabbit in “Alice in Wonderland”, always running around, trying to get to an endless stage. Michelle Lee emphasizes that “Speed Chic is fashion’s *crack*: cheap, quick and addictive” (my translation) (2003: 34). After consuming, several moods and feelings linked to one’s well-being, enthusiasm and self-esteem are triggered.

But the appetite of “The Fashion Victim’s (...) for new trends is not the only engine that keeps the wheels of Speed Chic turning” (2003: 39). In order for fashion-related markets to prosper, it is essential that there is a systematic shift in trends. Consumerism has become a sort of collective destiny, where nothing is made to last and where the obsolescence of products will guarantee the survival of the economic structures. For Michelle Lee, “Without trends, fashion would never have grown to be a multitrillion-dollar industry.” (2003: 36).

The author also addresses the way fashion is getting more and more influenced by disposability. By analogy with *fast-food*, she states that this is “fast, disposable, easy, unintimidating, entertaining, and largely homogeneous” (2003: 63). We are all aware that *fast fashion* has revolutionised the fashion industry, that is, it has re-educated the consumer, making him/her increasingly enjoy what is new; we know that *low cost* supply stores conquer new niche markets, and this brings substantial implications, both for consumers and for the market, i.e. “when more consumers begin to buy only the same handful of mass-market brands, the smaller, individually owned labels that sell more original clothes will eventually fade away from lack of business” (2003: 85).

Michelle Lee still focuses upon an essential aspect which is played in today’s fashion world. In the past, fashion used to concentrate fundamentally on clothes, whether the runways and fashion shows were subject to the media-conscious times we live in, if they were confined to clients, to fashion magazine publishers, journalists, but they were distant from leisure: Nowadays, everything has changed and “the worlds of fashion, media, and entertainment have collided, creating a mutually beneficial Big Bang of art, commerce, and theatrics, and saturating our daily lives with images of (and stealthy advertisements for) fashion” (2003: 95)

Another important aspect the author underlines is the relationship between the body and the fashion industry. Increasingly, the cult of the beautiful body prevails, and when leafing through a fashion publication, what we see is always the same fashion body: slim, shaped, fit, in short, homogenised. And, in those publications, the fashion body is always the sublime body. Hence, Michelle Lee says that “We appreciate the idea of magazines that use larger models. We’re glad they exist. We like the idea of magazines that show more ‘realistic’ sizes. The only problem is that we don’t buy them, and then they go out of business” (2003: 144).

However, if fashion “(...) makes you self-conscious about your body, it’s also right there to pick up the pieces”. “ (...) creates the problem and the solution” (2003: 166). That means

that the market is busy showing the fragilities of a body and, simultaneously, in developing an endless number of products in order to fill the shortcomings of an imperfect body, towards the illusion of a perfect one. This obliquity that frames the body as a body in the making, blames itself for its restrictions, for its limitations. In other words, a body is never too perfect, nor sufficiently beautiful. What is at stake is to punish an imperfect body which does not correspond to the archetype of the ideal body. If, on the one hand, we are told that our body is not in accordance with what it should look like, on the other hand, there are discourses that address expectations towards it: take care of yourself, and maybe you will resemble those sublime beings that can be seen in the streets and in fashion magazines. All this shows us how fashion has a paradoxical and unclear discourse. For the author, “The Fashion Victim’s intellect tells her she’s being silly; her emotions tell her she needs to lose weight. She puts all her hope and energy into losing weight, yet harbors an intense hatred toward the tyranny of thinness” (2003: 133). Michelle Lee emphasizes an important and ever more contemporary aspect: “For better or worse, fashion, if we let it, wields a massive power to shape our perceptions of our bodies” (2003: 137).

We conclude with a long quote by the author: “Our modern-day hunger for more clothes and the latest trends, together with the premium we put on looking good, has undermined our self-esteem, our health, the environment, our finances, our morals – but we continue to be more ravenous than ever” (2003: XV).

Yet, regardless of our considerations about fashion, its good and not so good aspects, it is still curious to register that, in accordance with the author, fashion “(...) will always succeed in convincing us to love it more” (2003: 285). //

Traduzido por Rui Silva.