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## Luxury for the Many: Politics and Virtues of the Knockoff

Were dissimulation not precisely their prowess, the ubiquity of luxury counterfeits would be enough to account for how routinely they recede from sight, into latency. For how they relax into things as objects are ought to, when human attention eludes them (Brown, 2010: 4). Predisposed to camouflage, out of focus and soft where originals are sharp, not unlike their imprecise substance is made up for in sheer numbers, it is by virtue of their abundance in the urban and suburban nodes of the world at large, that the visibility of luxury replicas as actors in the social milieu blurs. For all that they are supposed to aspire and approximate signs of distinction, it is to fakes' advantage that they are so difficult to detect. Because when perceived, in the 'privileged places' where they 'can be maintained longer as visible,' (Latour 2005: 80) such as precisely there where privilege surrounds them, by common consent knockoffs are disapproved of, as a rule either reproached or maligned. In polite society's bad graces, fakes when exposed are taken in as hostile.

Yet mainstream leftist thought is no more lenient toward it. In its haste to either condemn or pity those who yield to the temptations of commodity culture, luxury replicas prove almost too easy a target, more often than not presumed as but the poor material proof of a lapse of the female psyche – for it is only ever a woman’s psyche that lapses so – into not only vanity but a vanity above her means, supposedly making it worse.

But if it is true that “each society’ imposes itself on the subject’s senses, on the ‘corporeal imagination’ by which materiality as such is apprehended,” (Brown 2010: 9) such apprehension of luxury counterfeits, widespread yet western in origin, would have to be reframed as imposed by the competitiveness that characterises our own, or capitalism. By the peer pressure and scrutiny, always lucrative for it, that are the price we pay to live in a society where social hierarchies not only figuratively are sold to us as both subtle enough to confuse, and contingent enough to overcome with willpower and sacrifice. We would have to wonder then, if to resist society’s hardened criticism of knockoffs and those who wear them might not constitute a step toward renouncing, denouncing, at last surpassing the causes of which a popular prejudice is the effect.

This sounds utopian, but it is intended to. The changing of the valences that I would like to propose in thinking with counterfeits follows the example set by Fredric Jameson, who in his book *Valences of the Dialectic* seeks to reimagine Walmart as a new candidate for the function of utopian allegory today. Jameson writes of the hypermarket multinational chain as a new virus or species for its pandemic expansion, a subversion of the world order, the as of yet clearest expression of a hitherto fabled prognosis: ‘that dynamic of capitalism which devours itself, which abolishes the market by means of the market itself.’ While not a political practice per se, the thought experiment is devised to flex and test the limits of the imagination that to any effective political practice is crucial, but that since postmodernity too easily succumbs to the ‘impotent lucidity’ of cynical reason. In the chapter, *Utopia as Replication*, as an alternative to the sterile condemnation we’ve grown accustomed to, Jameson proposes:

a strategy of changing the valences and of converting the gloomy indices of the pessimistic diagnosis into vital

promises of some newly emergent historical reality to be welcomed rather than lamented

These gloomy indices, as vital promises, must be welcomed besides, ‘as though we had chosen them in the first place’ (2009: 413-33). We didn’t. Jameson’s utopia is somewhat accidental. The unintentionality of subversion that this infers and allows for proves crucial when the utopian method is applied to the study of counterfeits: themselves sub-versions, versions below standards but also underneath standard versions, parasitical and clandestine, hence perceived, if they are perceived at all, as immoral. Beneath morals, beneath conscience, sub-conscious. It would be preposterous to presume that anyone who makes or wears the luxury knockoff intends it as a revolutionary tool, but the knockoff is, for this, no less of one. For it is not intentionality but any form of oppression that spawns a resistance to it, in society as much as in the laws of physics. To the least conscious struggle against income inequality and social hierarchies, against power’s imposition upon our corporeal imagination – the utopian, politicised luxury replica will be an ally in disguise.

Whilst they might be concealed when at rest, or appear idle, when keenly observed the spectacles stir – ‘shuddering, stretching, and muttering,’ (Latour, 2005: 73) counterfeits emerge in schismatic multitudes out of background haze. What morals might be argued for in their production or consumption are questionable, but it is their immorality as such that we might come to treasure. In the 1970s, Jean Baudrillard complained that socialism had internalised in the name of the revolution morality and prejudices from the right, even though in previous centuries it had been well known, that only through its vices could any society be revolutionised (2017: 119). A luxury replica is a vice. More so, it is a vice of the public sphere, infectious and pervasive as it is discreet. The counterfeit market may not exist consciously as a site of resistance, yet less of uprising: its purpose isn’t to destabilize, for when luxury brands lose their lustre, demand diminishes. But it is immoral, ubiquitous and inconspicuous, and as such it is feared by power, whilst we can choose to espouse it in defiance of the counterrevolutionary bourgeois tradition to deplore the vices of the masses it

dismisses as spellbound (Jameson, 2009: 431), sinful or stupefied. Whilst we can choose to welcome its amplitude as the hopeful sign of a disregard for social rank shared among those who were supposed to sacrifice for it.

Indeed, unlike that of the exclusive desirables it replicates, the counterfeit market can only exist in mass consumption. If its numbers were policed it would become a market of originals<sup>1</sup>, a counterfeit version of which would soon follow suit. The consumption of counterfeits therefore can only exist as a consuming mass, that in its volume erodes and depletes the conditions of possibility for its own existence. One could argue that it manifests necessarily, and couldn't manifest otherwise, as what Baudrillard describes in a later essay as a 'destructive hypersimulation, a destructive hyperconformity ... that has all the appearance of a victorious challenge.' Contrary to the alienation bourgeois society mistakes it as, hyperconformity is a retaliatory practice: a disavowal of the code 'in favor of imploding the sign in fascination' (1983: 36-47). Baudrillard had written previously, previous to his revalencing of immorality too, of the code of status as a moral code, whose any infraction would account for a measure of guilt (1996: 194). But here the masses appear immune to remorse. In the very same way perhaps, that the apprehension of fakes imposed upon the individual in a competitive society eschews the crowd. When the masses – the female masses – hyperconsume luxury counterfeits, the imploding sign is the luxury brand, crushed beneath the weight of the desire invested upon it.

In truth, Baudrillard does warn the reader against the temptation to make 'out of this involutive sphere ... a new source of revolutionary energy,' its immorality evidently notwithstanding, so as not promote nonsense to political reason (1983: 40). But neither should we disregard its destructiveness as structural. If Schumpeter's theory of creative destruction as essential to it posits capitalism as a near-biological organism in regenerative metamorphosis (2003: 83), the counterfeit trade like Walmart is rather a virus, the out-of-sight parasite that subsists from and plagues it. Its refusal by way of endorsement, of meaning, of the

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<sup>1</sup> Conversely, the one constant distinguishing feature of all genuine luxury is its coming in small doses.

brand as meaning, of the sign and of the code, may well be senseless, but it does have consequences. As Baudrillard himself writes:

let it not be said that all this ultimately profits exchange value, that is to say the system. For if the system does well out of this game, and even encourages it ... [what this] initiates in the long term ... is the end of the economic, cut off from all its rational definitions by the excessive, magic, spectacular, fraudulent and nearly parodic use the masses put it to (1983: 45-46)

If we adopt luxury brands as a metaphor or metonym for the capitalist system, and as well we should if 'the fate of the economic begins to emerge in the form of fashion,' (Baudrillard, 2017: 113) this passage applies almost word for word to the luxury counterfeit trade and its most utopian outcome. Because originals do benefit in publicity from counterfeits' diffusion – for instance in Taiwan, according to a paper by Hsiao-hung Chang, the production of Louis Vuitton knockoffs for the Japanese market anticipated and served as an alternative advertisement for the opening of the first Louis Vuitton store in Taipei in 1983 (2006: 228). But counterfeits question the nature and notion of luxury, and their proliferation instils doubt at the sight of what was designed as undeniable proof of wealth. So the rational definition, the ontology of luxury, is weakened progressively toward implosion for the circulation of replicas. Replicas that are excessive in numbers, magic for their mimetic power, spectacular in seduction and manipulation, and spectacular too in Baudrillard's own understanding of the spectacular as that which the masses favour over meaning and wherein all messages inevitably and violently slide, that are fraudulent by law, and parodic in mocking their genuine ancestors.

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Now, another word for replica is reproduction. To reproduce is to make a copy, but it is also to pro-create, and indeed as well as the reproducer's archetype, the reproducers of luxury whether genuine or fake are usually women (Clean Clothes Campaign, 2005). But whilst originals too are reproductions of one another, the biological and strictly gendered connotations of the term truly come

to the fore when luxury replicas as unauthorised or illegitimate copies are concerned. In the age of global supply chains, when Western luxury brands following neo-colonial routes relocate the reproduction of goods that will later be labelled as their own to the opposite end of the world where labour is cheaper, where women's labour is often cheaper still, it's at times the same women in those regions if not on the very same sites, who produce both genuine luxury goods on the clock and the fakes that mimic them after-hours (Pithers, 2017). This unlawful offspring, as women's unlawful offspring always has done, has upon the rationale of luxury brands a profound and disturbing effect. As profound and disturbing perhaps, as postcolonial critic Homi K. Bhabha argues that the 'effect of mimicry on the authority of colonial discourse is profound and disturbing' (1994: 123). Like Baudrillard's hyperconformity is of the masses, so mimicry if for Bhabha a strategy of the colonized to disrupt and challenge the authority and legitimacy of the system that exploits them. By means of fakes besides, this subversive strategy extends from their producers to whoever wears the luxury replicas that of their disruption and challenge of the rules are the output. As Latour writes, 'objects overflow their makers, intermediaries become mediators' (2005: 85).

If a concern for authenticity, that is the origin and source and seed, where the brand acts like a surname, is a distinctly paternal quest (Baudrillard, 1996: 76), fakes defy patrimony, they mock, ostracise and discredit our patrilineal fixation with authorship and genealogy. In this they are undoubtedly as feminine not only as their reproducer but as their target consumer, who by wearing them resists and desists both the comfort of the authentic and the discomfort of the fake that upon her corporeal imagination capitalism as a patriarchal economic order strives to impose. It's its 'weaponization of imperceptibility and replication,' besides, akin to a woman's, that makes of the counterfeit in the hand of its consumer a feminist tool. After Sadie Plant, Amy Ireland writes of the quiescent power of women's aptitude for simulation and dissimulation, for:

anything that escapes the searchlight of the specular economy, even whilst providing the conditions of its actualization, has immense subversive potential at its

disposal simply by flipping that which is imputed to it as  
lack (2017)

As it recedes from sight, whether for its propensity for camouflage or their ubiquity, the same can be said of the luxury replica. Knockoffs partake in and favour social performativity, which means that they're sympathetic always and at times complicit to a woman's performance of a woman's role. Yet at the same time by their very existence they expose it as a construct, as affectation, and douse status displays and women's obedience alike with the sour suspicion of travesty.

When Russian Constructivist Aleksandr Rodchenko from the Soviet Union visited Paris in 1925, he wrote home of the nonmaternal women he observed there: nonconforming to what he perceived of as women's role of re-productive socialist mothers, but performing instead a different one, to him unfamiliar and thus more visibly unnatural, manufactured. Women in capitalism were rather 'allied with the system of objects,' and Rodchenko found them 'ugly and endlessly terrifying' (Kiaer, 1996: 15-16). When womanhood is disclosed as performative, woman ought to be reframed as deceptive – to the point that the spontaneity of her motherly disposition too may be called into question. As objects whose deception is quintessential and deliberate, that play a role and can assist women in playing theirs, it is no wonder that luxury replicas are so widely demonised, across the political spectrum in capitalist societies but also, usually, along gender lines. The prejudice against fakes is best understood in relation with the universal prejudice of woman's vanity, her cultivation of appearances and the supposedly innate capability to pretend which she's truly socialised to learn. To be sure, the alliance of women and objects is a condition for the actualisation of commodity fetishism, and for the objectification of women as commodities in capitalism that Rodchenko too laments in his letters. What he misses, however, what's often missed and not by chance, is its subversive potential, which whether or not intentional finds expression in the mass consumption of unperceivable luxury replicas as much as it does in the mass production that supplies them, often at the hand of the same, usually female workers who supply the luxury industry with genuine luxury goods.

But if it's in mass consumption that the subversive potential of the fake is finally realised, one might argue then that if a luxury original were to be as

assiduously and profusely consumed, it too would destabilise in comparable ways its own brand and the system. This is true, and has happened in times and places of uncontrolled prosperity, such as indeed Japan in the 1980s (Chang, 2006: 226). But the reverse is not. Luxury aims to fulfil its purpose as a means of social discrimination – it is only when abused by the women who desire it, that it can become otherwise. On the contrary, as innocuous as a luxury replica may look when observed singularly, a tendency to breach privilege is always by design inbuilt within it, built within it, that is, by the workers who built the fake. The knockoff tempts consumers into ridiculing and threatening the brands they admire. There's obstinacy to it: it carries forth a seed of revenge. Its perfunctory compliance with the visual codes of status symbols is at all times traced with dissent. When polite society perceives, if it perceives them at all, fakes as hostile, it may well be out of an instinct of self-preservation.

But what does this inbuilt tendency look like, how do we locate materially revenge or dissent? Since for any one genuine luxury item a multitude of replicas arise with dissimulation as their foremost purpose, it is difficult to propose an analysis of anything other than the individual product. But we might still be able to generalise if for nothing else for those that are or have come to be considered the fake's telltales, characteristics a knockoff has that the original doesn't, or the qualities it misses which give it away, *that which is imputed to it as lack*. They would have to be understood as something akin to what Bhabha identifies as 'the excess or slippage produced by the ambivalence of mimicry' (1994: 123). If anywhere, it's within this lack or slippage or excess that a utopic reassessment and tentative appreciation of luxury replicas in substance other than theory should begin.

Consider the sparkle. Gertrude Stein writes in *Tender Buttons* that '[c]ertainly glittering is handsome and convincing' (1914: 9), and the luxury knockoff accepts it as true and lives by it. To the point that, if luxury is a degree of refinement above prevailing standards, 'applied either to the material or to the outward form' of any product (Sombart, 1967: 60), counterfeit luxury betrays itself in zest, in its eagerness to scintillate and convince. Drawing attention toward it and drawing it away from its shortcomings (Shanzhai Lyric, 2018), the fake's shine is applied in excess, prone either to peel off or smear. Its radiance, besides, is stolen

– the counterfeit is a vampiristic entity: it sucks the lustre out of a luxury brand. This in turn affects its own demand, its subsistence. It must migrate elsewhere, attach itself to others, evolve. Consider the business of its patterns, the primitivism of their execution, the misspellings of slogans and logos that Lin and Tatarsky read as a creole language, whose strategic use is to be understood ‘as a mode of resistance, as a subversion (through reappropriation) of Western cultural imperialism’ (2015).

Consider the fake’s depthlessness. Even when it is a container, which it is often, because leather articles and handbags are the industry most affected by piracy (OECD/EUIPO 2017: 49), the knockoff is surface in high percentage. The luxury replica is shallow, insubstantial, lighter in weight than its original, which also makes it faster. But its speed isn’t just that at which it is reproduced, relieved of ritual and of detail, it’s also that at which it wears away. For this fragility the fake is pliant, it yields and thus it ages, it retains temporality (Bruno, 2015) among its folds and along its surfaces in such a way that the genuine luxury good, aiming for immunity to the passing of time, does not. The luxury replica burns out quickly but burns bright: in this, as much as in its ‘velocity, intensity, and spread’ we can choose to recognise a new source of value. ‘By losing its visual substance’ in other words by breaking down, the luxury replica like Steyerl’s poor image ‘recovers some of its political punch and creates a new aura around it. This aura is no longer based on the permanence of the ‘original,’ but on the transience of the copy’ (2009).

At last, a knockoff is always ephemeral. When it breaks<sup>2</sup>, it is returned to its status as thing. Bill Brown writes that ‘we begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us’. Genuine luxury goods are objects because they signify, they are designed to draw our eye and bask in the attention they receive. But things don’t bask. Of things, we can only catch a glimpse sideways for they will turn into objects as soon as observed. As soon as observed, the luxury replica still working for us turns into an object too: it plays its part, it signifies and draws our eye as the original luxury good it imitates is wont to. But it always remains a thing

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<sup>2</sup> Luxury originals sometimes break too. But in their ideality as sign-objects, they can never be consumed in their materiality (Baudrillard 1996, p. 200-05). See also: Magdalena Crăciun, ‘Rethinking Fakes, Authenticating Selves’ for how the consumption of fakes as approximations of ideals can gratify instead (2012, p. 859-60).

beneath, and when it stops working, its thingness is all that we're left with. While the original as object in slow or halted consumption still serves its consumer, the broken counterfeit no longer does: it has exceeded subservience, it became something else. Brown understands thingness as 'the before and after of the object,' a *latency* – in other words, a lack or slippage – or an *excess* (2001: 4-5).

As Jameson advises we do for society as a whole, we should then perhaps regard the fake's symptoms of degradation as promising (2009: 434) – we should then perhaps cherish them as the vanguard of ruins to come, of a classless future society coming soon to replace our own. For now I would like to suggest that we try and think with the counterfeit as a Trojan horse in the realm of commodities, infiltrating consumer culture as an implosive receptacle, stealthy, sudden and self-serving, unstable and loose and leeching, the repository of a collective unconscious whose sabotage albeit is neither that of its producer nor of its consumer but gathering and magnetising motives and desires at both poles, still endemic to the fake and symptomatic of a synthetic agency which belongs to it, there where in its stead the original is only passive, there where, as Boris Arvatov declared in 1925, the bourgeois thing is dead (Arvatov 1997[1925]: 122).

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