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Popular Culture: Avavav and Urbanist Ideals

Today, about 56% of the world's population lives in cities (The World Bank, 2023). With more than 80% of global GDP generated in cities, 21st-century urban life is entangled in a multifaceted array of relations, but the scope of this analysis will focus on the urban setting of 'popular culture.' While defining popular culture is an ongoing debate, broken down it is understood as "simply culture which is widely favoured or well-liked by many people," (Storey, 2006, p. 6). Since over half of the world's population now lives in cities, the role of urbanism in popular culture is beyond predominant, as the term 'popular' in urban settings would mean something is favoured by the majority of the population. The opposite would be *to be difficult*, as some might argue for something to be "culturally worthwhile it has to be difficult, [and] being difficult ensures its exclusive status as high culture. Its very difficulty literally excludes; it guarantees the exclusivity of its audience," (Storey, 2001, p. 6). This relationship between 'popular' and 'high' culture has been at play for decades, most notably through fashion in urban life. Fashion, seen as art, culture, and a commodity, has played between the dimensions of 'popular' and 'high' culture within the urban realm as status symbols for both those wanting to stand out and exude their wealth, and for others to fit into the status quo. Storey (2001) articulates the capability of culture to shift from 'popular' to 'high' throughout time and space, highlighting that William Shakespeare is now seen as the epitome of high culture yet in the nineteenth century was certainly popular culture. Fashion, both in its design and runway production, holds the capacity to be similar, as the needs, wants, and desires of people in the urban realm dictate the value fashion holds. While this idea is mostly discussed in academia, the practice of such is simply engrained in urban dynamics of wealth and power and one emerging fashion house has taken such dynamics as direct inspiration for its designs. Avavav is an independent fashion house that strives for "creative freedom, driven by humour, entertainment and design evolution" (Avavav, 2020). Founded in 2020, Avavav is led by Creative Director Beate Karlsson and caught media attention globally after the house's most recent runway collections. Each collection depicts a dynamic of urban life which Karlsson wants to challenge,

from the hyper-fixation to create items of scale at record speeds, to the unwritten rules of luxury and fast fashion, to urbanism's hyperfixation on wealth and status. Due to the brand's media attention and ability to connect with the greater urban public on such issues, this paper will argue that the brand AVAVAV is a form of popular culture where urbanism plays a central role in the brand's design and production storytelling capabilities. Both the Spring/Summer 2023 and Autumn/Winter 2023 collections will be analyzed for the role the city and urban dynamics play in the designs, followed by their commentary on urban life and the intended audience. This analysis will conclude with a personal reflection on how Avavav's collections have impacted my understanding of urban life.

Role of the City in AVAVAV's Collections

The first collection of Beate Karlsson's analyzed as a popular culture reference to urban life is the Spring/Summer 2023 Milan Fashion Week show titled "Filthy Rich." Models wore bejewelled bathing suits with dollar-sign badges, dresses that toyed with familiar designer logos, absurdly oversized hoodies and jackets, knee-high furry "Moonster" boots, baseball caps with dollar signs and the phrase "Filthy Rich," and lastly the collection theme was driven home by the three-piece, \$300,000 Rolex necklace (Dorsey, 2022). The collection comments on fashion's fixation on status and wealth, and the pursuit of money. Karlsson comments, "In a time of recession, cash and escapism are at the top of the agenda," (Avavav, 2023, p. Runway). Karlsson embraced Gen Z's fixation on escapism through the coined statement of 'fake it until you make it,' exposing the ever-known concept of success and failure. Largely targeting the Gen Z audience, Karlsson did not hold back in calling out the use of wealth and richness as a power move the generation uses to escape modern worries. The role of the city predominantly shapes the discussions surrounding this collection, as the ideas of escapism originate from postmodern urbanism and fear of the city. Fear of the city was exacerbated in the 1960s and 70s through the introduction of mass media, ultimately changing urban landscapes through the promotion of security systems, gated communities, the purchasing of handguns, and the increasing surveillance of public spaces (Ellin, 2003). As a period of accelerated rates of change as well as the growing gap between the rich and the poor, escapism as an expression of wealth became predominant not only in architectural design (the growing popularity of gated communities) but through fantasy worlds such as theme parks, leisure megastructures (sports stadiums and

convention centres) and mega-stores (Ellin, 2003). The idea that money could be used as a means to escape the problems urbanism posed on residents grew in popularity. In response, popular culture has coined its capabilities to lead with an undertone of a political agenda. As does Avavav, other forms of popular culture, like the TV show *The Wire*'s "creators had a political agenda. They wanted *The Wire* not only to examine the realities of urban life but also to provoke moral outrage," (Dreier & Atlas, 2009, p. 330). Avavav has the same effect. The collection explores the idea of escapism in the twenty-first century, and how escapism in practice has changed from the design of physical spaces to block out urban anxieties, to the reliance on and desire from consumption and superficial wealth. Avavav's collection communicates the insanity behind the idea that having more money and more luxurious items removes the consumer from the anxieties and problems of urban life. Hidden statements embedded in the design and production of the collection, like the 'Moonster' sculptural footwear covered in fur, screams "I am wealthy" and make viewers think twice about why they purchase certain items. Beyond design, Karlsson is a genius when creating runway show productions, and left viewers with a profound sense of chaos and angst as each model dramatically fell to the floor while walking the runway. The choreographed falls served as a metaphor for our incapacities to keep up with capitalist consumer ways, and to show that even those who invest heavily in making their wealth known, experience the inability to keep up or withstand the realities of urban life.

In Karlsson's second runway collection, the designer drew her inspiration from the unwritten rules of luxury and explored what happens if one breaks them, literally. As models walked down the runway, the garments started to fall apart, first with a bag breaking, then heels snapping, then to whole pieces unpinning themselves almost exploding while being worn. The role of the city in the Autumn Winter collection acts as the ever-churning wheel with which society feels like it must keep up. The "Fake It Till You Break It" collection title alludes to the pressures of urban life, where citygoers feel like urban living comes with meeting the image and wealth standards of living in such places. With many consumers turning to fast fashion to 'keep up' with the ideals of an urbanite, Avavav hints at the problematically short lifespan calls of fast fashion as the collection falls apart on the runway. Drawing attention to the shame surrounding bad-quality pieces as they fall apart, the show points to the ever-known concept of success and failure. Within the city, failure is the ultimate fear, and success is the ultimate goal. Urban life deems that there is constantly more to achieve, buy, or experience. Helphand's (1988) article,

The 1950s and the Birth of the Contemporary American Landscape supports this idea when the author says, “We live within the dreams and desires of our ancestors... The recent past has been a time of acceleration in the rate, scale, and scope of environmental transformation,” (Helphand, 1988, p. 40). Helphand alludes to the idea that despite society constantly looking for ‘more,’ the conditions of the twenty-first century are what those of previous generations could only have dreamed of. This rapid transformation has distorted society’s sense of time in terms of generating success, and fast fashion is the consumer’s attempt at keeping up with such ‘successful’ identities. The intended audience of this collection is broader than Spring Summer 2023, as not only the theme is relevant to a wide age of consumers but Karlsson also described the collection as “mixing street with dominant femininity,” (Avavav, 2023, p. *Runway*). By mixing street style into the collection, Avavav is nodding, once again, to the prevalence of the city. Street style is understood as an opposition or base-level reality to other varieties of fashion that are typically perceived as fantastical (Luvaas, 2020) or of higher importance. By Karlsson keeping the collection to feminine street style, the designer ensures that viewers don’t mistake the collection’s meaning and ensures that the audience understands that fast fashion and consumption are not fantastical and that it is intricately linked to city environments.

Conclusion

Avavav’s 2023 collections have impacted my understanding not only of urban life and the pressures of consumerism for those living in cities but also my understanding of popular culture in having a greater educational role that should be reviewed in greater detail, compared to traditional peer-reviewed publications (Atkinson & Beer, 2010). Popular culture, such as fashion design and production, that positions discussions of urban issues at the forefront of the collections can reach far wider audiences than typical peer-reviewed research. The intersection of art, culture, and activism has shifted my understanding of the different ways that we can draw attention to the problems associated with urban life. While Avavav’s story-telling capabilities are brought to life through Karlsson’s production and choreography of the runway shows, the storytelling and interactive nature allow viewers to connect with fashion on a deeper level, and understand Karlsson’s desire to poke holes into urban issues. As social media and the use of other popular culture mediums grow Avavav’s reach, the brand’s potential influence on future trends in the intersection of fashion and urban culture is only beginning.

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