

Intellectual Fashion/Fashion Intellectual: Luxury, Branding, and the Glamorization of Theory

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Abstract

In *No Logo*, Naomi Klein states: “It is not to sponsor culture but to be the culture”, referring to world-famous brands that started approaching new and experimental marketing techniques. Yet, as early as 1974, Pierre Bourdieu argued that the discourse on *haute couture* was already a discourse on *haute culture*, undoing the exquisitely philosophical prejudice that collocated fashion among small and frivolous things, unworthy of observation. This paper returns to this question through investigating the case of *Gucci Aria*, which used famous books of philosophy and critical theory as props. Even if this is not a novelty in the fashion world — from Miuccia Prada’s “radical chic-ism” to Martin Margiela’s deconstruction — what is new is that fashion has found itself having to study and incorporate knowledge that comes from the so-called high culture usually aimed at a niche audience of intellectuals. This is more than the attempt of lifestyle branding to address social and political movements’ vindications as part of the social corporate responsibility strategy. What is the purpose behind selling theory itself? How can this exploitation carried out by fashion brands be read as a way of popularizing high culture? Are fashion designers playing at being organic intellectuals and is conspicuous consumption finding its new goal?

Keywords: Fashion; Philosophy; Brand; Popularization; Media.

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Introduction

The difference and antagonism between high and low culture is something that has always haunted the very concept of culture in general. Fashion, as a language (consequently, as a medium that is capable of transmitting and embodying meanings and cultural processes) and as a market (and therefore something oriented to capitalism and consumption), has always found itself at the centre of this tension. As the question is not resolved and probably will never be, the purpose of this article is to go further in interrogating fashion as both a language and market, hoping the conversation will become even more complicated and ultimately irresolvable, but nonetheless fascinating to study and to deconstruct.

The irruption of the word “culture” in the field of marketing can be traced back to the 1970s, when companies started using lifestyle branding in order to turn their products into values, imageries, dreams, and aspirations. However, today we are beyond lifestyle branding. Especially since social and political movements have built a solid scientific and theoretical foundation to enrich their vindications (such as queer and feminist movements, antiracism, environmentalism and so on), selling dreams and aspirational values is no longer enough: fashion has found itself having to study and incorporate that knowledge to appear more socially responsible. This is nothing new so far, as brand activism and corporate social responsibility have been heavily applied over the years by marketing offices. What about selling theory instead of culture in general? Furthermore, what about selling that form of culture that is conventionally defined as “high”?

Emblematic of this intellectualization of fashion is Alessandro Michele’s Gucci. Since his debut during the Menswear Fall/Winter in 2015, the designer has enriched the brand identity of the house through a diversified bibliography of critical theory and philosophy.

However, if thinkers such as Michel Foucault and Hannah Arendt and their ideas would usually remain in the subtext of the collections, mentioned in press releases or transformed into symbols through clothing and scenography, it is in the 100th anniversary collection that they have become objects of the advertising campaign. For *Gucci Aria*, which has gone viral on social media for their collaboration with Balenciaga in *The Hacker Project*, famous books of philosophy such as *Simulacres et Simulation* by Jean Baudrillard,¹ *Bodies That Matter* by Judith Butler² and *Sexistence* by Jean-Luc Nancy³ were placed side by side with clothes and accessories with a fetishistic and BDSM taste. The bulimic reference made by Alessandro Michele to high and low culture has proved to be a winning formula for selling the same product to both the educated elite and teenagers obsessed with trap music.

Read through a marketing perspective, this phenomenon can be captured with the definition of “multiplicity” elaborated by Henry Jenkins, as a recontextualization of theory and philosophy that is incarnated in new forms of corporeality and clothing in fashion collections; but the opposite is true as well, that is to say that fashion repositions itself into the philosophical discourse when the latter leaves the university and becomes the theme for a runway show or a fashion film. This expansion of brands’ meanings makes decoding and appropriation (not necessarily through purchase, but also with “simple” symbolic consumption) more stimulating for brand lovers, resulting in an enhancement of engagement.

If, nevertheless, the distinction between high and low is not effective but produced by a series of dominant discourses, does running with the hare of mass culture and hunting with the hounds of intellectualism reiterate it? It seems Bourdieu is right in stating “the internal struggle can only lead to partial revolutions that can destroy the hierarchy but not the game itself.”⁴

The aim of this article is to go into detail and problematize this dynamic, where fashion designers play at being organic intellectuals and philosophical texts are transformed into a commodity worthy of con-

1. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacres et Simulation* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1981).

2. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter. On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

3. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Sexistence* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 2016).

4. Pierre Bourdieu, “Haute Couture and Haute Culture,” *Sociology in Question* (London: Sage, 1993. First published in *Noroi*, 192, 1974), 134.

spicuous consumption.

Phenomenology of Alessandro Michele: Theory and Praxis

Since his debut for the Fall 2015 Menswear collection for Gucci, Alessandro Michele has been praised by the press and by revenues for his atypical taste: disruptively enough from past designers and creative directors that worked for the house, Michele's vision was characterized by a gender-bending perspective on masculinity, heterogeneity in cultural references and maximalism. Especially on that occasion, the statement was clear enough: despite various degrees of toxicity and heteronormativity displayed by designers such as Tom Ford and Frida Giannini in past collections, Michele aimed at revolutionizing the concept of gender, beginning with men. The fashion journalist Tim Blanks described the feeling of that first collection as an "androgynous languor" and defined the new creative direction as "nonconformist, romantic, intellectual."⁵ In a general atmosphere of the radical re-thinking of gender roles in every side of culture, the political intentions of Michele's work were seized immediately.

Over the following collections, Michele tended to enrich his narrative for the brand with new imageries and references: occultism, 1970s glam rock, entomology, Ancient Greece, science fiction, old Hollywood, club culture, comics, and so on, all of which were adapted to this fresh take on gender, sexuality, and queerness. However, it was not until the 2018 Fall/Winter collection, in which male and female models walked the runway together, that Gucci got "theoretical". In fact, for that occasion, the collection took place in what resembled a surgery room, with operating tables and lights, and was composed of shapes, patterns and prints from different and sometimes diverging cultures and symbolic systems. A couple of models carried replicas of their heads as props, or a baby dragon, or an iguana, all of them made by the Roman special effects company Makinarium.⁶ The collection was called *Gucci Cyborg*, undoubtedly inspired by the pivotal Marxist-feminist essay "A Cyborg Manifesto"⁷ by Donna Haraway, in which the philosopher evokes a utopia where human and machine are fused together in order to demystify any assumption of unity, fullness, and naturalness related to the conceptualization of the human body. The result was a chaotic and inhomogeneous assemblage of different textures, even of different body parts and species, that could be easily defined as "posthuman": floral babushka-like shawls were combined with turbans and balaclavas, the New York Yankees and Paramount Pictures logos were embroidered on pompous evening gowns and suits. Some dresses reminded of nuns' clothes, some others were inspired by old Hollywood starlets.

After this collection, which set a milestone for Michele's career in Gucci, his aesthetics became explicitly political, quoting philosophical works in press releases and in clothes as well, as exemplified by the case of *Gucci Manifesto*, a collection with the dark tones of thriller and horror movies such as *Eyes Wide Shut*,⁸ *Suspiria*⁹ and *The Silence of the Lambs*,¹⁰ that was inspired by Hannah Arendt's acceptance speech for the Sonning Prize,¹¹ in which the philosopher discussed the concepts of "mask" and "persona". After

5. Tim Blanks, "Gucci Fall 2015 Menswear," *Vogue.com*, 19th January 2015, <https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/fall-2015-menswear/gucci>.

6. "Come sono state fatte le teste mozzate di Gucci," *IlPost.it*, 27th February 2018, <https://www.ilpost.it/2018/02/27/teste-mozzate-gucci-makinarium/>.

7. Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women. The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 149–182.

8. *Eyes Wide Shut*, directed by Stanley Kubrick, written by Stanley Kubrick and Frederic Raphael, produced by Stanley Kubrick (Warner Bros., 1999).

9. *Suspiria*, directed by Dario Argento, written by Dario Argento and Daria Nicolodi, produced by Claudio Argento (Produzioni Atlas Consorziate, 1977); *Suspiria*, directed by Luca Guadagnino, written by David Kajganich, produced by Marco Morabito et al. (Amazon Studios, 2018).

10. *The Silence of the Lambs*, directed by Jonathan Demme, written by Ted Tally, produced by Kenneth Utt et al. (Orion Pictures, 1991).

11. Hannah Arendt, "Sonning Prize Acceptance Speech," 1975, https://www.irenebrination.com/files/hannah-arendt_sonningprizeacceptancespeech-.pdf.

the runway presentation, a capsule collection composed of t-shirts and sweatshirts was released, with the words of Arendt printed on the back.

In 2018, for the 50th anniversary of the political protests of 1968, Gucci released a fashion film and an advertising campaign shot by Glen Luchford, titled *Gucci Dans Les Rues*, inspired by May 68 in Paris.¹²

The Resort 2020 collection, which took place at the Roman Musei Capitolini, was inspired by pagan culture as well as by the political turmoil of Rome in the 1970s, as shown by the writing “Because only pagan antiquity could arouse my desire. Because it was the world of the past, because it was a world that no longer exists”, a quote by the historian Paul Veyne, spray-painted on a bedsheet and left hanging on the columns of the museum with a very students’ riots flair.¹³ Three outfits referred to feminism: the slogan “My body my choice” embroidered on the back of a jacket, a crystal and floral uterus embroidered on a peplum, and the date “22.05.1978” written on a cloak, referring to the day of the approval of the law 194 in Italy that gave access to free and safe abortion for women.

The following season provoked an intense discussion on social media revolving around the glamorization of mental health issues,¹⁴ as in the first part of the runway show, a group of models walked wearing utilitarian clothes full of knots and buckles, reminding the viewer of straitjackets. The second part of the show, the one that was later put in production and commercialized, paid homage to Tom Ford’s heavily sexual aesthetics from the 1990s. Despite the queer trace of Michele’s vision, this was a quite gendered collection: female models wore sexy see-through slip dresses, latex gloves and chokers, and held whips, while men wore the Gucci version of yuppie suits, double-breasted with padded shoulders. Some of the accessories and pieces of clothing were printed with the formulas “Gucci Orgasmique” and “Gucci Eterotopia”, referring to Michel Foucault’s concept of heterotopia presented in the book *The Order of Things*.¹⁵

Aside from fashion collections, the house created a series of activities related to art and culture that were aimed at positioning the brand as “intellectual” and “woke”, such as the foundation of Gucci Chime for Change, a global campaign focused on gender equality accompanied by a free zine distributed online and in selected bookstores, curated by the activist Adam Eli, in which different artists and writers gathered together to trace the paths of queer culture in all parts of the world.¹⁶

For the 2018 Milano Men’s Fashion Week, the brand hosted the actor Silvia Calderoni along with the independent theatre company Motus for a special performance of the piece *Mdlsx*,¹⁷ inspired by Jeffrey Eugenides’ narrative on intersex in the novel *Middlesex*.¹⁸ Silvia Calderoni also joined the cast of *Ouverture of Something that Never Ended*,¹⁹ a series of fashion films, along with the philosopher Paul B. Preciado and the music artists Billie Eilish and Harry Styles. Preciado, famous for his works in queer theory concerning transitioning, biopower and the medicalization of transgender lives,²⁰ presented his

12. Gucci, “Pre-Fall 2018 Campaign: Gucci Dans Les Rues | Gucci,” 12th February 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KcSQcEn6b5s>.

13. Maddalena Labricciosa, “Gucci ai Musei Capitolini tra antico e moderno, un inno alla libertà,” 29th May 2019, *HuffingtonPost.it*, https://www.huffingtonpost.it/entry/la-sfilata-di-gucci-ai-musei-capitolini-tra-antico-e-moderno-e-un-inno-alla-liberta_it_5ccea816e4bofo78035dfd97/.

14. “Camicie di forza, frustini fetish, colore e trasparenze, la rivoluzione di Gucci contro le regole,” *RaiNews.it*, 23rd September 2019, <https://www.rainews.it/archivio-rainews/media/Camicie-di-forza-frustini-fetish-colore-e-trasparenze-la-rivoluzione-di-Gucci-contro-le-regole-8bab5dae-f870-42b7-9afd-26e843d7aebd.html#foto-1>.

15. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things. An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, trans. Tavistock Publications (New York: Routledge, 2002).

16. “Gucci Chime For Change,” *Gucci.com*, <https://equilibrium.gucci.com/category/people-en-gb/chime-for-change/>.

17. Giulia Borgazzi, “Com’era MDLSX, la performance di Silvia Calderoni al Gucci Hub,” 14th January 2019, retrievable from <https://www.gqitalia.it/moda/gallery/performance-silvia-calderoni-gucci-hub>.

18. Jeffrey Eugenides, *Middlesex* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002).

19. “Ouverture of Something that Never Ended,” *Gucci.com*, <https://www.gucci.com/it/it/st/guccifest>.

20. Cfr Paul B. Preciado, *Testo Junkie. Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era*, trans. Bruce Benderson (New York City: The Feminist Press, 2013).

book *Can The Monster Speak?*²¹ with the Italian writer Chiara Valerio at the Gucci Garden, in Florence, on the occasion of the cultural festival *L'Eredità delle Donne*.²² For an episode of the brand's podcast,²³ the philosopher Emanuele Coccia and the artist Anna Franceschini joined for a conversation about the exhibit *Archetypes* at the Gucci Garden. In 2020, the house sponsored the art exhibition *Quadriennale di Roma* at Palazzo delle Esposizioni, titled *Fuori*²⁴ and inspired by the 1970s Italian homosexual magazine *Fuori!* Previously, the brand sponsored the fashion exhibition *Camp: Notes On Fashion*,²⁵ inspired by Susan Sontag's *Notes On "Camp"*,²⁶ at the Fashion Institute of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Finally, it is worth mentioning *Gucci Aria*, famous for *The Hacker Project* capsule collection with Balenciaga, presented in April 2021 with a fashion film directed by Floria Sigismondi.²⁷ The show, which marked the 100th anniversary of the fashion house, recalled the equestrian heritage of Gucci resemanticized through a fetish and BDSM imagery. Models walked down a runway full of flashing cameras and video recorders that, given the sexual theme, spoke the language of OnlyFans and sharing nudes, which made perfect sense during the periods of isolation caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, resulting in an aesthetic reflection on intimacy and sexuality during social distancing. The peephole, recurring throughout the film, referred to a certain idea of voyeurism experienced through technological devices and social media, as well as to their panopticon gaze creeping into the private space in the impossibility of living the public space. Heart-shaped clutches emphasized the lack of affectivity and tenderness, and their necessity, during such confusing times.

At the end of the fashion film, the models entered a heavenly garden full of lush flowers and exotic animals, able to breathe again, to touch, hug, and kiss each other, future nostalgia for a life before the pandemic.

The ad campaign, shot by Mert Alas and Marcus Piggott, was described as an "exploration of the Ontology of Desire,"²⁸ and featured the Italian rock band Måneskin. Among different Gucci pieces such as harnesses, whips, feathered jackets and riding boots, the advertising campaign sees the presence of various philosophical works such as *Simulacres et Simulation*²⁹ by Jean Baudrillard, *Bodies That Matter*³⁰ by Judith Butler and *Sexistence*³¹ by Jean-Luc Nancy, all coherent with the sexual and affective undertones of the collection. It is undeniable that Alessandro Michele mentioned theory and philosophy here and there in every moment of his career, providing a bibliography that gets richer and richer, but marked the first time that physical books appeared in the project, and not just in press releases in the form of references, but in the ad campaign along with Gucci clothes. The questions that rise from this strange advertising strategy are: what is Gucci trying to sell? How blurred is the line between intellectualization and commodification, as theory becomes a fashion accessory?

21. Paul B. Preciado, *Can the Monster Speak? A Report on an Academy of Psychoanalysts*, trans. Frank Wynne (London: Fizzaraldo Editions, 2021).

22. "Corpo celeste: Paul B. Preciado incontra Chiara Valerio al Gucci Garden," *Ereditadelledonne.eu*, <https://ereditadelledonne.eu/video/corpo-celeste-paul-b-precियो-incontra-chiara-valerio-al-gucci-garden/>.

23. Gucci Podcast, "Emanuele Coccia e Anna Franceschini esplorano l'universo sensoriale di Gucci Garden Archetypes," *Spotify.com*, August 2021, <https://open.spotify.com/episode/4cZdOkEXBbu7K6qaPrnGiL>.

24. Sara Cosulich and Stefano Collicelli Cagol (eds.), *Fuori. Quadriennale d'Arte 2020*, exhibition catalogue (Roma: Treccani, 2020).

25. Andrew Bolton (eds.), *Camp: Notes On Fashion*, exhibition catalogue (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2019).

26. Susan Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp'," in *Notes on "Camp"* (Penguin Random House UK, first published in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, London: Picador, 1966).

27. Gucci, "Gucci Aria," directed by Floria Sigismondi, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H14DatRxoUo>.

28. Gucci, "The Gucci Aria Campaign," directed by Mert Alas and Marcus Piggott, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ob57oCescv4>.

29. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacres et Simulation*, op. cit.

30. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter. On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*, op. cit.

31. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Sexistence*, op. cit.

On the Eternal Struggle between High and Low Culture

As much as we conceive fashion as a language and an art form, capable of conveying complex messages and visions of the world according to the designer's sensibility, the relationship between fashion and art has always been controversial to say the least. This controversy can be traced back to the phallogocentrism of Western metaphysics diagnosed by Jacques Derrida: in *Of Grammatology*, the philosopher speculates about how our culture has been organized into binary categories that go back to the dichotomy between speech and writing, oppositional terms that are organized hierarchically where the first is superior to the second. If speech is another term for "presence", "truth" or "God", writing is a masquerade of it. It is no surprise that Derrida mentions Ferdinand De Saussure's eloquent description of writing as "a clothing, [...] a garment of perversion and misuse, a dress of corruption and disguise, a festival mask that must be exorcised."³²

Coming from the cultural and philosophical milieu of structuralism, Saussure conceptualized writing as something impure compared to speech, directly related to language, which was the privileged object of interest of structuralism. Derrida, on the other hand, problematized this dichotomy, focusing on a more immersive analysis of the structures of language and affirming that there are plenty of elusive and unquestioned meanings inside and outside the binaries our culture is based on, being the one between speech and writing the first but certainly not the last.³³

In the realm structuralism as well, Roland Barthes can be credited as the philosopher and semiotician who considered and included different forms of culture in his analyses. Especially in *Mythologies*,³⁴ Barthes put everyday objects and images, such as detergent advertisings and celebrity photographs, in a continuum with products of high culture, in order to compose an exhaustive symbolic landscape of the French bourgeoisie of his time.

Cultural Studies made an analogous comparison when scholars as Richard Hoggart³⁵ and Raymond Williams³⁶ focused on everyday life as a cultural category, expression of the pure British working class, and defined culture as "a whole way of life", observing working rituals, leisure time practices and every aspect of daily experiences as privileged objects of scientific analysis. Moreover, especially with the key figure of Stuart Hall, Cultural Studies broadened the concept of culture, progressively including mass culture products as objects of a sociological, semiotic and culturological gaze. Similarly, Umberto Eco's "Fenomenologia di Mike Bongiorno,"³⁷ a study on the flattening of the Italian television of the economic boom and the rise of the common man as a television character, is a vivid example of the growing interest of the academia for low culture, especially in its most massified and capitalistic forms, and how it exemplifies social, cultural and political changes.

It is evident that every metaphor related to fashion is used as a pejorative, at least in Saussure, considering that philosophy has always seen fashion and clothing as something related to the body (frivolous, immanent, feminine) and, for that reason, something that has nothing to do with the realm of ideas or transcendence³⁸ (solemn, everlasting, masculine). For the same reason, art has always been privileged to be in direct relationship with the artist's intentions, feelings, and truths, in comparison with a system of fashion that is drowned in capitalism and obsessed with change, and because of that is related to death and decay.

32. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016 [1974]), 38.

33. Cfr. Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London and New York: Routledge, 2002 [1978]), 351-370.

34. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1975).

35. Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy. Aspects of Working-Class Life* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1957).

36. Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society 1780-1950* (New York: Anchor Books, 1960).

37. Umberto Eco, "Fenomenologia di Mike Bongiorno," in *Diario Minimo* (Milano: Bompiani, 2017). First published in 1961.

38. Cfr. Karen Hanson, "Dressing down Dressing up — The Philosophic Fear of Fashion," in *Hypatia*, 5.2, Feminism and Aesthetics (Summer, 1990), 107-121.

Many philosophers, art critics, and scholars, have questioned the dichotomy between art and fashion without achieving an exhaustive answer on whether fashion can be considered art or not. Valerie Steele points out:

Historically, fashion has tended to be dismissed as superficial, ephemeral, and material. By contrast, art has been valorised as significant form, eternally beautiful, and spiritual in nature (although these qualities have been radically questioned in recent years). Because fashion *changes* — because change is at the heart of fashion — it has seemed to lack the qualities of truth and ideal beauty that have been popularly associated with high art.³⁹

However, it is the case that at least since Andy Warhol and pop art⁴⁰ the relationship between high and low culture, art and fashion, has been more complicated than a mere question of oppositions. In fact, it is around that same period that Susan Sontag spoke for the “creation of a new (potentially unitary) kind of sensibility,”⁴¹ affirming that any distinction between high and low culture is an illusion. Similarly, Pierre Bourdieu affirms: “when I speak of *haute couture* I shall never cease to be speaking also of *haute culture*,”⁴² going against any preconception that places fashion as low culture and problematizing the discourse on fashion during the Sixties, arguing that taste in fashion does not merely depend on wealth, but especially on cultural and symbolic capital. Additionally, once art as well has become a matter of marketing strategies, what kind of transcendence is to be defended against the immanent and fetishistic character of fashion?

There is a long genealogy of couturiers, fashion designers and creative directors who have collaborated with artists for the launch of specific products, for designing scenography, and campaigns, more generally to support their vision with something that could be perceived as consistent and legitimately cultural. From Elsa Schiaparelli and Salvador Dalí’s design of the *Lobster dress*⁴³ to Louis Vuitton’s limited-edition bags created by Jeff Koons, Takashi Murakami, and Yayoi Kusama,⁴⁴ passing through Vanessa Beecroft’s performances for Valentino, Helmut Lang, and Yeezy⁴⁵: the crossovers between art and fashion date the birth of Western fashion as we know it. Then there is the plethora of designers who took inspiration from the world of art. The most famous case is Yves Saint Laurent’s *Mondrian dress*, but it is worth mentioning Gianni Versace’s use of Andy Warhol’s portrait of Marilyn Monroe as a print for the Spring/Summer 1991 collection,⁴⁶ Raf Simons’s use of Robert Mapplethorpe’s photography for the Menswear Spring/Summer 2017 collection,⁴⁷ and many more.

In *No Logo*, Naomi Klein chronicled a shift in the world of marketing: if traditional marketing was aimed at selling products, in the 1970s, the goal of branding was to sell ideas, concepts, worldviews, and lifestyles that would go beyond the product and remain in consumers’ minds more easily and persistently.

Documenting a variety of examples in which companies started building their brands through values and imageries, Klein notes: “It was about thirstily soaking up cultural ideas and iconography that their

39. Valerie Steele, “Fashion,” in *Fashion and Art*, eds. Adam Geczy and Vicki Karaminas (London and New York: Berg, 2012), 13.

40. Cfr. Sandra Miller, “Fashion as Art; Is Fashion Art?,” in *Fashion Theory*, 1.11 (London and New York: Routledge, 2007).

41. Susan Sontag, “One Culture and the New Sensibility,” in *Notes on “Camp”* (Penguin Random House UK, first published in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, London: Picador, 1966), 39.

42. Pierre Bourdieu, “Haute Couture and Haute Culture”, *Sociology in Question* (London: Sage, 1993. First published in *Norôit*, 192, 1974), 134.

43. Steele, “Fashion,” op. cit., 16.

44. Barbara Heinemann, “Curating an Exhibition: Art and Fashion,” in *Fashion and Art*, eds. Adam Geczy and Vicki Karaminas (London and New York: Berg, 2012), 206.

45. Nadja Sayej, “A Brief History Of Vanessa Beecroft’s Best Fashion Collaborations,” *Theartgorgeous.com*, 3rd May 2018, <https://theartgorgeous.com/brief-history-vanessa-beecrofts-best-fashion-collaborations/>.

46. Cfr. Richard Martin, *Gianni Versace*, exhibition catalogue (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1997), 53–54.

47. Alexander Fury, “Raf Simons Gets Candid About His Collaboration With the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation,” *Vogue.com*, 23rd June 2016, <https://www.vogue.com/article/raf-simons-alexander-fury-interview>.

brands could reflect by projecting these ideas and images back on the culture as ‘extensions’ of their brands. Culture, in other words, would add value to their brands. [...] It is not to sponsor culture but to *be* the culture.”⁴⁸ In fashion, this change has been particularly evident, especially in the dynamics between luxury brands and art, where the case of Prada is the most exemplary. In the 1990s, Miuccia Prada and Patrizio Bertelli decided to exhibit their art collection, with the help of the art critic Germano Celant, in a gallery named Prada Milano Arte and later Fondazione Prada that, over the years, has hosted exhibits for the most famous contemporary artists of the world (among many: Francesco Vezzoli, Anish Kapoor, Louise Bourgeois, Damien Hirst, and Jannis Kounellis⁴⁹) and has imposed itself as an epicentre of contemporary art in the city of Milan.⁵⁰ Today, even though the fashion and art projects are kept and managed as two distinct areas, Prada is not just a luxury brand with an intellectualistic and radical-chic aesthetics, it is also the name behind for one of the most influential art institutions in Italy. Prada *is* the culture, and it has proven to be such a successful cultural and business model that paved the way for many other forms of fashion/artistic patronage. A few examples of the relationship between Gucci and other cultural and artistic institutions have already been discussed in the previous chapter, but the case of Dior under the creative direction of Maria Grazia Chiuri is worth mentioning as well. As the first female creative director of the fashion house since its foundation in 1947, after a long and distinguished genealogy of male designers such as Christian Dior himself, Marc Bohan, Gianfranco Ferré, and John Galliano, Chiuri decided to characterize her vision with feminist theory and art. For her first collection in 2016,⁵¹ she presented the infamous “We should all be feminists” slogan t-shirt, inspired by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s Ted Talk,⁵² sparking a heated debate about the commodification and pop-ization of feminist political battles and women’s rights in the era of #metoo.⁵³ In the following years, Chiuri collaborated with feminist artists such as Tomaso Binga⁵⁴ and Judy Chicago⁵⁵ for the set design of her runway shows. For the Fall 2020 ready-to-wear runway show, Dior collaborated with the feminist art duo Claire Fontaine,⁵⁶ who created a series of neon signs with sentences and slogans inspired by Italian second-wave feminism such as “We are all clitoridean women” (from Carla Lonzi’s *La donna clitoridea e la donna vaginale*⁵⁷) and “Women’s love is unpaid labour” (from Silvia Federici’s *Salario contro il lavoro domestico*⁵⁸). For the inauguration of the Carla Lonzi archive, Dior sponsored the art exhibit *Io dico io — I say I* at the Roman Galleria Nazionale⁵⁹ and previously, the house also sponsored *The Unexpected Subject. 1978 Art and Feminism in Italy* at the FM Centre for Contemporary Art in

48. Naomi Klein, *No Logo*, op. cit., 29–30.

49. Fondazione Prada’s, exhibitions archive, <https://www.fondazioneprada.org/calendario/?period=past&tmpl=1>.

50. Cfr. Nicky Ryan, “Patronage: Prada and the Art of Patronage,” in *Fashion and Art*, eds. Adam Geczy and Vicki Karaminas (London and New York: Berg, 2012), 155–167.

51. Sarah Mower, “Christian Dior Spring 2017 Ready To Wear,” *Vogue.com*, 30th September 2016, <https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/spring-2017-ready-to-wear/christian-dior>.

52. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, “We Should All Be Feminists,” 12th April 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hg3umXU_qWc.

53. Cfr. Monica Titton, “Afterthought: Fashion, Feminism and Radical Protest,” in *Fashion Theory*, 23.6 (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), 747–756.

54. Giulia Ronchi, “Lessico femminista alla sfilata prêt-à-porter di Dior. Tra le opere di Tomaso Binga,” *Artribune.com*, 1st March 2019, <https://www.artribune.com/progettazione/moda/2019/03/lessico-femminista-sfilata-pret-a-porter-dior-opere-tomaso-binga/>.

55. Giulia Ronchi, “‘E se le donne governassero il mondo?’: Dior e Judy Chicago insieme al Musée Rodin,” *Artribune.com*, 3rd February 2020, <https://www.artribune.com/progettazione/moda/2020/02/dior-judy-chicago-insieme-musee-rodin-sfilata/>.

56. Giada Biaggi, “‘Siamo tutte donne clitoridee’, tutto sul collettivo femminista Claire Fontaine a partire dalla sfilata Dior,” on *Elle.com*, 27th February 2020, <https://www.elle.com/it/magazine/arte/a31115153/claire-fontaine-dior-femminismo/>.

57. Carla Lonzi, *La donna clitoridea e la donna vaginale* (Milano: Scritti di Rivolta Femminile, 1971).

58. Silvia Federici, *Salario contro il lavoro domestico* (Napoli: Collettivo femminista napoletano per il salario al lavoro domestico, 1976).

59. La Galleria Nazionale, Cecilia Canziani et al. (eds.), *Io dico Io — I say I*, exhibition catalogue (Roma: Silvana Editoriale, 2021).

Milan,⁶⁰ both of which were focused on Italian and international feminist art.

This quotationist attitude that fashion has always had towards art, sometimes even parasitic and exploitative, surely has the underlying purpose of ennobling itself, of elevating fashion to museum status and high culture. In this sense, it resembles Fausto Colombo's "mouse strategy"⁶¹: in *La cultura sottile*, Colombo describes the winning example of the comic magazine *Topolino*, published from 1932 to 1937 and then from 1949 until the present time, an Italian adaptation of Mickey Mouse that has drawn inspiration many times from Italy's literary culture, making it a desirable product both for children (the original target market of the magazine) and for grown-ups wanting to enjoy the Disney version of *The Divine Comedy*, *Orlando Furioso*, *The Betrothed*, *The Travels of Marco Polo* and so on. In doing so, *Topolino* acquired the cultural level that those masterpieces possessed, or at least, it became interesting for both the masses and the élite.

The *Gucci Aria* advertising campaign is peculiar and very interesting from a theoretical point of view because it is a step further from lifestyle branding, which seems "old stuff", and gets closer to the mouse strategy. It is not just a matter of randomly quoting an artist or sponsoring an art festival or an exhibit. The purpose of Alessandro Michele, with an imagery so rich in philosophical and political references, seems to *be* the culture, or even to be an organic intellectual, as elaborated by Antonio Gramsci: somebody who has the capability to create hegemony, to influence and educate the masses organically.⁶² It might seem strange or forced to describe something as "mundane" as a fashion designer with an expression created by one of the most influential philosophers of Italian culture: on one hand, this estrangement may have its reason (again) in the illusionistic distinction between high and low culture (which sounds paradoxical, considering Gramsci's interest in the concept of "popular"); on the other hand, the function of the organic intellectual is what the market requires from fashion designers today. In fact, the 2019 McKinsey and Business of Fashion report notes that:

Nine in ten Generation Z consumers believe companies have a responsibility to address environmental and social issues. The inclusion of the latter is a departure from the views of the previous generation of millennials, which had a greener focus. The change is reflected in the higher profile of social issues, and campaigns such as #metoo, #blacklivesmatter and #timesup, all of which have entered the mainstream lexicon over the past couple of years: [...] Some two-thirds of consumers worldwide say they would switch, avoid or boycott brands based on their stance on controversial issues.⁶³

The amplification of social injustice during the Covid-19 crisis has enhanced this attitude to a point in which any fashion brand has to constantly educate and exercise its sensitivity in order not to be "cancelled" or "called out" by social media pages and profiles like Diet Prada or Ideservecouture. If conceived as a language immersed in reality, it is no doubt that fashion has the possibility or even the duty to document and interpret social and cultural change; but such a point of view can be reached only if its capitalistic nature is momentarily suspended from the discussion. Once commodification and cannibalization, marketing, branding, and communication resurface, there are inevitable questions regarding whether it is morally correct to transform philosophy, critical theory, social battles, and political vindications into pricey items of clothing and accessories.

60. Marco Scotini and Raffaella Perna (eds.), *The Unexpected Subject. 1978 Art and Feminism in Italy*, exhibition catalogue (Milan: Flash Art srl, 2019).

61. Fausto Colombo, *La cultura sottile. Media e industria culturale in Italia dall'Ottocento agli anni novanta* (Milano: Bompiani, 2017), 20, 175.

62. Cfr. Antonio Gramsci, *Gli intellettuali e l'organizzazione della cultura* (Torino: Giulio Einaudi Editore, 1949).

63. McKinsey&Company, Business of Fashion, *The State of Fashion 2019*, <https://www.mckinsey.com/~media/mckinsey/industries/retail/our%20insights/the%20state%20of%20fashion%202019%20a%20year%20of%20awakening/the-state-of-fashion-2019-final.ashx>, 43.

Popularizing Philosophy through Fashion Mediatization

In order to critically understand the scenario we have depicted so far, we need to enlarge our gaze to comprehend this phenomenon within the frame of media processes, fashion mediatization, audience engagement, and the phenomenon of politics popularization.

As we already know, the increasing digitalization of the media eco-system is going to affect all aspects of everyday life even more than in the past century, resulting in a process of both mediation and mediatization: this process arises from the idea that the media have become increasingly central in defining institutions and agents, their practices and experiences and the content and meanings they produce and share.⁶⁴ Starting from the very premise that the media have become an essential and inflexible dimension of all social processes,⁶⁵ we have now to focus on “the process whereby society to an increasing degree is submitted to, or becomes dependent on, the media and their logic.”⁶⁶ According to Hjarvard, in other words, understanding the mediatization process can help us in understanding how media, as technologies, institutions and aesthetic forms, become intertwined with, and influence other social institutions and cultural phenomena, spreading and sharing their own logic.

This, then, also concerns fashion, as Rocamora pointed out.

Looking at mediatization in the field of fashion means looking at the ways practices of fashion — practices of production, consumption, distribution and diffusion — are articulated through the media, and, more crucially, are dependent on the media for their articulation. The interest is not on the idea of communicating fashion through the media but on doing fashion through the media.⁶⁷

This consideration leads us to think about the world of fashion as totally permeated by the media logics, in terms of storytelling and content production, but also in building and managing relationship with consumers. Everything in the fashion system is now thought and produced within the frame of media, both traditional and digital ones. As Rocamora underlines, this means that even a product can be produced to be consistent with the media system where it will be represented and shared by both the brands and the consumers. The increasing amount of fashion media content, not only that related to advertising campaigns, are now always available to consumers, to the point that fashion content and media content definitely overlap, and we may refer to fashion consumers as audiences for fashion.⁶⁸ As a matter of fact, brands have increasingly turned themselves into both narrative universes and media companies, as they produce not only clothes and accessories, but enhanced experiences in terms of lifestyle that are mostly based on both communication strategies and opportunities of interaction with consumers, beyond (and even without) the act of purchasing fashion items. If the idea of fashion consumers as engaged in consuming and producing meanings when buying and wearing clothes comes as no surprise within the field of fashion studies, here we are going beyond thinking about consumers who may consume fashion without consuming fashion items. The pleasure of consumption is namely related to an immersive entertaining experience that can overcome every reference to the world of fashion itself, as in the case of fashion films or in transmedia storytelling.⁶⁹

This kind of pleasure produced by consumers is strongly related to the emotional and affective aspects of consumption, that are typical of fandom phenomena and are now a reality in every field of our mediated world, not only within the media industry. Observing fans, we may discover how they invest

64. Nick Couldry and Andreas Hepp, “Conceptualizing Mediatization: Contexts, Traditions, Arguments,” in *Communication Theory*, 23.3 (2013), 191–202.

65. Nick Couldry, *Media, World, Society* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012).

66. Stig Hjarvard, “Soft Individualism: Media and the Changing Social Character,” in *Mediatization: Concept, Changes, Consequences*, ed. K. Lundby (New York: Peter Lang, 2009), 160.

67. Agnès Rocamora, “Mediatization and Digital Media in the Field of Fashion,” in *Fashion Theory*, 21.5 (2017), 505–522, 4.

68. Andò Romana, *Audience for Fashion. Consumare moda nei media e con i media* (Milano: Egea, 2021).

69. Cfr. Sergei A. Medvedev, “Il branding transmediale nella moda: il caso Burberry,” *ZoneModa Journal Issue 5 — Fashion Convergence* (Bologna: Edizioni Pendragon, 2015), 74–81.

their emotional involvement in their cult objects, turning this attitude and motivation into the pleasure of being engaged with the objects.⁷⁰ As soon as this trait of fandom phenomenon started to overcome the boundaries of media content *stricto sensu*, we started to observe fandom practices in different fields: from politics, to religion, to social and civic issues in general. For example, Van Zoonen⁷¹ refers to this phenomenon when analysing how political engagement has to be read in continuity with entertainment engagement. Lunt and Spenner refer to the idea of the “emotional public sphere”⁷² and Coleman emphasizes that young generations address political and civic issues more while watching Big Brother than confronting the traditional political language and content.⁷³

These considerations help us in introducing two other fundamental aspects for our discussion: first of all, the blurring and hybridization of content and meanings in the popular culture, where political, cultural, and social issues coexist with entertainment (in content and aesthetic forms) and they cannot be fully separated. According to Dahlgren “popular culture invites us to engage — with both our hearts and minds — in many questions having to do with how we should live (and how we should live together) and what kind of society we want.”⁷⁴ In other words, the so-called popular culture combining different content and easily reaching the audience as the public, represents an opportunity to expand (and not to reduce, by distracting the audience) the area of visibility of political issues. In a more general sense, we may say that the forms and languages of entertainment may support politics and socio-cultural issues to reach a larger audience, thanks to stories of connection and expression that can connect people and invite them to ideologically identify with these representations.

Secondly, this phenomenon can be read referring to the idea of affective publics: according to Papacharissi media storytelling, and more specifically that related to social media activities, let the audience assemble around media and platforms “that invite affective attunement, support affective investment, and propagate affectively charged expression.”⁷⁵

The media content serves as storytelling structures that sustain a modality of engagement that is primarily affective. Papacharissi defines these (social) media audiences as affective publics and explains that the affect is

not emotion. It is the intensity with which we experience emotion. It is the slight tap on our foot when we hear a song but have not yet cognitively processed that we like it. It is the phatic nod we produce when we are listening along to what someone is saying, but we have not yet decided whether we fully agree or not. More precisely, it is the drive or sense of movement experienced before we have cognitively identified a reaction and labeled it as a particular emotion. Its in-the-making, not-yet-fully-formed nature is what invites many to associate affect with potentiality.⁷⁶

Moving from these very premises, we should be now able to read Alessandro Michele and his attempt to merge philosophical issues with fashion as part of a wider process that goes beyond fashion and philosophy themselves. The first consideration concerns the perception of fashion within our culture and so-

70. Matthew Hills, *Fan Cultures* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003); John Fiske, “The Cultural Economy of Fandom,” in *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, ed. Lisa A. Lewis (1992): 30–49. Tr. It. Andò Romana (a cura di) *Audience Reader*, (Milano: Guerini, 2007).

71. Liesbet Van Zoonen, *Entertaining the Citizen: When Politics and Popular Culture Converge* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005).

72. Peter Lunt and Paul Spenner, “The Jerry Springer Show as an Emotional Public Sphere,” in *Media, Culture and Society*, 27.1 (2005), 59–81.

73. Stephen Coleman, “How the Other Half Votes: Big Brother Viewers and the 2005 General Election,” in *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 9.4 (2006), 457–479.

74. Peter Dahlgren, *Media and Political Engagement. Citizens, Communication and Democracy* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 141–142.

75. Zizi Papacharissi, “Affective Publics and Structures of Storytelling: Sentiment, Events and Mediality,” in *Information, Communication & Society*, 19.3 (2016), 307–324, 308.

76. Idem 316.

ciety. As previously discussed, even if many scholars have demonstrated that fashion is a serious topic⁷⁷ that can help in understanding society,⁷⁸ individuals and their identities, and the relationships among people, groups and communities, it continues to be perceived as a trivial content. Does this mean that we cannot take it seriously? Does this mean that we must talk (only) about clothes and accessories as an ephemeral and volatile issue? The answer is clearly negative, but barely accepted by critics. However, if we accept the idea that entertainment may also have an effect in terms of enlarging democracy and public reflection and debate,⁷⁹ then fashion as well as popular culture is able to be effective as a space for public deliberation.

Moreover, as well as media entertainment, which actually forms part of it, fashion is able to stimulate public engagement and affect, as described by Papacharissi when explaining the novel attitude of networked individuals towards both media content and politics. This is especially so when considering transmedia storytelling as a common language that combines a multitude of content from pure entertainment (if so) and political and cultural issues.

Nowadays brands, and fashion brands in particular, are investing in building complex narratives that exploit the opportunities provided by digital media and at the same time the audience willingness to be part of an enhanced experience of consumption. Analysing the original attempts of Alessandro Michele to put fashion at the same level of philosophy and vice versa, this resonates with the strategy of multiplicity described by Jenkins as encouraging the audience “to think about multiple version — possible alternatives to the established canon”. In other words, quoting Foucault before a fashion show or scattering books by Judith Butler and Jean-Luc Nancy in advertising campaigns may act as a disruptive moment compared to the fashion rituals of ephemera. Moreover, all the philosophical insertions in fashion representations we mentioned at the beginning of this article may act as a stimulus to detect more information, to dig deep into the meanings, satisfying the attitude to drillability⁸⁰ so typical of fandom. It also allows fans to extract fundamental pieces of the symbolic universe of Gucci by potentially purchasing items at the end.

Alessandro Michele actually plays with his fans, using the same media logic that we can recognize within the media industry. He tries to facilitate feelings of engagement among fans and ask them to participate and share content, meanings and experience, and definitely to become protagonists and part of a participatory culture. Focusing on relevant, controversial and crucial topics, he makes people feel reenergized about what it means to be politically engaged, even when wearing branded t-shirts or watching a fashion film. “Fan activism can encompass a broader range of activities, some of which are distinctly political and may contribute to an increased level of civic engagement.”⁸¹

To summarize, if then the frame starts to be clearer, we need now to focus on the effects of this popularization process. After general enthusiasm towards the increasing growth of democracy produced by the hybridization between popular culture and politics, scholars are now reflecting on the trivialization of the content that was once relegated to specific other spheres. We can discuss this point starting from a specific phenomenon which is particularly characteristic of the converge culture⁸² and the networked society⁸³: the audience creativity and productivity and the circulation of memes. As we already know, the low barriers to expression provided by the new digital environment have provided the audience with a new form of empowerment: if the term participatory culture is intended to contrast with older notions

77. Pierre Bourdieu, op. cit.

78. Agnès Rocamora and Anneke Smelik (eds.), *Thinking Through Fashion: A Guide to Key Theorists* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015).

79. See Peter Dahlgren, op. cit. Liesbeth Van Zoone, op. cit.

80. Jason Mittell, *Complex TV. The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (New York: New York University Press, 2015).

81. Lori Kido Lopez, “Fan Activists and the Politics of Race in *The Last Airbender*,” in *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 15.5 (2012), 431–445, 432.

82. Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture. Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

83. Barry Wellman, “The Rise (and Possible Fall) of Networked Individualism,” in *Connections*, 24.3 (2002), 30–32.

of media spectatorship, media making is definitely a participatory act. Sharing and spreading content are also part of media participation (the so-called small act of engagement⁸⁴).

The circulation of memes is now a widespread phenomenon, and it concerns media entertainment as well as politics (and politicians), religion, and philosophy. Memes on Derrida and Foucault circulate within the web,⁸⁵ as well as memes dedicated to celebrities and politicians. Even though this process clearly enlarges the visibility of some content, the process of trivialization may result in a sort of symbolic disappearance related to the excess of exposure. As in the trickle-down model, philosophers associated with fashion will be abandoned as soon as the largest audience reaches them and appropriates what they represent.

Conclusion

In the past, such a move like Michele's quoting of noble philosophy in fashion would have been judged as snobbish, elitist, or even arrogant. Today, in a mediascape where philosophy is constantly turned into memes and fashion is perfectly adapted in its content and in its purposes, at least at first glance, it arouses curiosity and keeps us captivated, postponing the judgement on its use and its efficacy.

After all, it is not the first case, nor will be the last, in which philosophy is turned into pop culture: as described by François Cusset, once post-structuralism was assimilated by the American academia in the 1980s, it got twisted into "French Theory,"⁸⁶ a convenient label that would be useful for all sorts of intellectual products, from scientific papers to electronic music.⁸⁷ If fashion's implementation of philosophy might be described as a transformation of the latter into conspicuous consumption, in its most Veblenian sense, the use and abuse of post-structuralism diagnosed by Cusset is conspicuous consumption as well, where theory becomes an intellectual trend.

Surely Michele has followed what is worthy to define as a "trend", but this move could not be possible if fashion was not this large cauldron in which diametrically opposite things can coexist in aesthetic forms. The right time, the right place: a feature, or a serendipity, that fashion proves to have and to exercise wisely over and over again.

In conclusion, fashion seems to be the perfect space to truly consume, and assimilate, such theories in forms of embodiment, a way to turn theory into praxis, a praxis that rightfully so but in an overtly simplistic way is and will always be dismissed (or even doomed) as consumeristic, but that before being so, is fundamentally political.

84. Ranjana Das and Brita Ytre-Arne, *Audiences, Towards 2030 Priorities for Audience Analysis* (University of Surrey, 2017).

85. As in the case of Facebook groups and Instagram profiles such as *Michel Foucault's Moist Meme Maison* (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/709652895868263>), *Jacques Derrida Phallogocentric Meme Town* (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/205494696821029>) @fakebaudrillard (<https://www.instagram.com/fakebaudrillard/>) and @bodylessorgans (<https://www.instagram.com/bodylessorgans/>), all of which count thousands of followers.

86. François Cusset, *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze & Co Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States*, trans. Jeff Fort (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

87. Simon Reynolds, *Energy Flash. A Journey Through Rave Music and Dance Culture. New and Revised Edition* (London: Faber and Faber, 2013), 481–482.

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