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Upcycling: The *Art Nouveau* of Fashion?

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Abstract

This paper explores the intersection of sustainability, aesthetics, and ethics within the fashion industry, focusing on Upcycling as a key driver of the green fashion movement. By drawing parallels with the *Art Nouveau* movement, the article examines how Upcycling can serve as a catalyst for both ethical and aesthetic transformations in the industry. Through a detailed analysis of concepts such as art, craft, style, and taste, the paper investigates whether Upcycling can become the linchpin of a paradigm shift toward more sustainable fashion. It also considers the influence of deconstruction fashion, particularly the works of designers like Margiela, Demeulemeester, and Kawakubo, as foundational to the timeline of "reuse, reduce, recycle." Ultimately, the paper aims to establish a theoretical framework that links aesthetic reception, social belonging, and marketing effectiveness to the industry's ethical practices, assessing the potential for Upcycling to influence fashion's future sustainability.

Keywords: Upcycling; Green Fashion; Deconstruction; Art Nouveau; Sociology of Fashion.

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Introduction

It is increasingly common for the fashion industry's growth to be associated with environmental footprint. In this context, not only do we witness the promotion of abhorrence towards fast fashion ethics, but we also suffer the irrelevance of higher-quality fashion. Those two factors combined call for an insight connecting the lack of a social orientation fashion movement with the emerging need for the inclusion of ethics into aesthetics in the industry. *Art Nouveau* is not used as a mere metaphor for a new trend developing in the industry, but as a parallel to Upcycling where at least three convergence points are to be found and discussed in the present article. Through the analysis of key definitions like art, craft, style, and taste, I will seek to answer whether Upcycling can be taken into account as the key element to popularize the green fashion movement overall and whether the *Art Nouveau* movement example is a fitting parallel of a paradigm shift in the industry. Furthermore, deconstruction fashion popularized by Margiela, Ann Demeulemeester, Rei Kawakubo, and others will serve as the starting point for the "reuse, reduce, recycle" timeline that will be outlined. The theoretical amalgamation of the above definitions, practices, and visions is to be presented as the necessary foundation for understanding the entangled relations of aesthetic reception, social belonging, marketing effectiveness, and the industry's ethics regarding the perception of Upcycling and its imminent success or not.

Art Nouveau and Upcycling: Three Parallel Characteristics

Nothing can support itself without proper foundations. *Art Nouveau* emerged as a movement within the realm of Fine Arts and Upcycling appears as a new practice of Fashion, and more specifically within the green fashion movement. It is important here to distinguish the subset relationship of the two pairs: Fine Arts with *Art Nouveau* and Fashion with Upcycling, where the latter is a subset of the former. The importance of the relation is manifested in a variety of ways, the first one being the initial deprecating attitude of the former towards the latter that is even more prominent in the relation between Art and Fashion itself. The reduction to the relation of the core concepts — i.e., Art and Fashion — will allow better understanding of the relation of interest, which is *Art Nouveau* and Upcyling.

Pierre Bourdieu once said, "when I speak of haute couture I shall never cease to speak also of haute culture", which aligns perfectly with Susan Sontag's opinion that "the distinction of high and low culture is an illusion".[1] But is it really the case for Art and Fashion? The duality lies in the notions of the eternal and the ephemeral, as pointed out also by Oscar Wilde in his *Philosophy of the Dress*. There is something about fashion that, in the eyes of high culture (or at), is received as an unserious facade. Both Andò and Campagna[2] and Blumer[3] make references to obsession and mania as emotional expressions that condemn fashion to a lower tier of cultural significance. It is, therefore, the distance from the realm of Platonic forms that degrades fashion as an artistic branch. Whatever is dressed is not pure because it is not the truth. The duality here manifests as the perception of impurity that exists on the side of the masquerade as opposed to the truth. Accordingly, the duality of high and low culture extends to the domain of applied arts, where crafts are degraded, and the discussion turns to achieving the status of "art".[4] Or should we simply say "status"? The distinction is not to be seen as a distinction between higher and lower status; it is either status or no status. Status means power, and whatever lacks status becomes an object over which one can wield power. Thus, fashion, because of its association with change, decay, and femininity, is viewed as an object signifying its inherent powerlessness.

1. Romana Andò and Leonardo Campagna, "Intellectual Fashion/Fashion Intellectual: Luxury, Branding, and the Glamorization of Theory," *ZoneModa Journal*, Vol. 12, no. 1 (2022): 151.

2. Andò and Campagna, 151.

3. Herbert Blumer, "Fashion: from Class Differentiation to Collective Selection," *The Sociological Quarterly*, Vol. 10, no. 3 (June 1969), 284.

4. Constance Classen, "Art and the Senses: From the Romantics to the Futurists." in *A Cultural History of the Senses in the Age of Empire*, eds. Constance Classen (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 10.

In a similar manner, *Art Nouveau*, as a movement of the "arts and crafts", meant that the tactile qualities emerging through the turn to craftsmanship were of lower reception compared to the creative visions stimulating the sense of sight. Classen[5] stresses that the revival of the crafts, along with their success in acquiring the status of art, served as a rehabilitation of the sense of touch. Even though all this still remains in the domain of art, if one thinks of Upcycling as having the role of *Art Nouveau* but directed towards Fashion, it becomes evident that a rehabilitation of the tactile experience and an overall creative vision is required in order for Upcycling to acquire status — specifically, fashionable status. Otherwise, it is fated to remain confined to the threshold of the do-it-yourself internet crafts. Another parallel to achieving the status of art is achieving the status of style, which was viewed as a matter of high vitality by Guimand.[6] This same duality persists in all the conceptual pairs — fashion/art, craft/art, movement/style — and it is a matter of triviality as opposed to profundity, nonchalance versus heedfulness, powerlessness versus powerfulness. Considering the last pair of concepts, what is it that makes a style superior in its reception compared to a movement? Again, the concept of permanence emerges. A movement signifies something abrupt, swift and uncertain, while a style is continuous, timeless and durable. This can be interpreted in a dual manner. First, this could be the case as for why style is seen as something that relates, or always seeks to relate, to the society that creates it, while a movement, on the other hand, is seen as depicting a deviation from the established societal stability. This understanding of a movement naturally brings up the second interpretation of the duality, which begs the question: is the uncertainty of a movement a threat to the advantages of having a stable society? Consequently, another question follows: does the achievement of status benefit the initial goals of a movement or does it muzzle its core?

At this point, we present the second parallel between *Art Nouveau* and Upcycling: the shift from industrialized, mass-produced prototypes to slow-paced, hand-crafted goods. The parallel supports itself through the integration of hybridity in the concepts forming each one and the variety of expertise flowing from outside each field. In the case of *Art Nouveau*, it was the fusion of material, ethical and spiritual aspects into the practice, as well as the introduction of applied arts professionals such as botanists in the role of illustrators. For Upcycling, it involves mixing sustainable principles and innovative ways of design and manufacturing, along with the incorporation of scientific multidisciplinarity aimed at the best use of resources. On the side of *Art Nouveau*, botanical designs flourished following the re-release of *The Origin of Species*, while in the case of Upcycling, a fashion waste management crisis gave birth to repurposing. Consequently, it becomes clear that, as in the case of *Art Nouveau*, a revolution in perception was followed by a revolution in materials.[7] Similarly, in the case of Upcycling, a shift in the materials used is followed by a shift in our perception of fashionality, thus creating an equation with a double turnstile.

Although their paths are reversed, both share a spirit of intentionality in their practice, manifested in the combination of various design forms, expressions and craftsmanship techniques, all while aiming for the bigger picture. This blend of materials, arts and artists emphasized the problem present in the industrial goods which, at the time of the *Art Nouveau* movement, was the sole impression of works of art.[8] In the same way, the massive production and virtual display of fashion products give the impression of quality, yet lack the actual experience of it. Accordingly, experience, in itself, is a highly sensory phenomenon that is deprived of its full sensory capacity due to the industrialized prototypes. One way to achieve a fuller experience is through engaging with the actual function of a design, and hybrid arts, according to Gün[9], is where the interest in functionality originates.

However, functionality in itself prolongs the unceasing division between arts and crafts. If art is under-

5. Classen, 10.

6. Paul Greenhalgh, "A great seriousness: *Art Nouveau* and the status of style," *Apollo. The International Magazine of the Arts*, Vol. 151, no. 459 (2000), 5.

7. Asa Briggs, "A cavalcade of tastes," *The Architectural Review*, 1977, 228.

8. Fatima Tokgoz Guz, "The Place and Importance of Hybridity in Arts and Crafts and Arts Nouveau Art Movements," *Premium E-Journal of Social Sciences*, Vol. 5, no. 15 (2021), 404.

9. Guz, 404.

stood as connected to the ethereal realm of ideas, truth and purity, and crafts to the material world of corporeality, tangibility and concoction, then functionality is condemned to matter, far from the spirit. That is also why the sense of touch is in desperate need on rehabilitation; whatever can be touched belongs to the matter, not to the spirit. This rather bothersome premise is found in the metaphor of "touching the soul" by all means but actual touch, which justifies why the division of arts and crafts pushes categorically towards achieving the status of art. *Art Nouveau* is presented in all kinds of texts and textbooks as having a successful resolution in this challenge. It is, after all, a style. But what would be the case for Upcycling? Recycling, in general, carries a moralistic attitude which is completely new to the field of fashion, and furthermore, only a subset of ethics that could directly relate to art. Where *Art Nouveau* managed to break through this duality by merging science and mysticism and claiming its serioussness, Upcycling aims for the same by blending science and new style. Thus, the third parallel characteristic of the two is the reorientation to function, and to be more precise in the case the two is the reorientation toward function, and more precisely, in the case of Upcycling, to a *new* function. If the style proposed by Upcycling manages to meet the aesthetic criteria of (high) fashion, then functionality will grant its rehabilitation, similarly to touch.

Through the analysis of the three parallels, the reflections on duality are inescapable. No matter the depth of the reduction of the concept, and the limitations of escaping it, the grounding of this dual understanding of the world is an agreement in society, rather than in external reality. Ultimately, some dualities are self-cancelling in their essence, and others persist creating a hierarchy, as seen in the subtext of the present analysis.

Granting the Blessings of a Cultural Capital

The binary understanding of art and fashion, according to Derrida, is skillfully described in de Saussure's depreciation of written language as "a garment of perversion and misuse, a dress of corruption and disguise, a festival mask that must be exorcised".[10] Derrida's deconstructionist approach to philosophy is of greater importance to the present paper, as the timeline guiding the present analysis of the ability of Upcycling to impact the social spectrum starts with deconstruction in the field of fashion. Additionally, the deconstruction of theoretical concepts can serve both as a parallel of deconstructing design principles and as a methodological approach for the concepts of the present study. These commonalities are going to be spread throughout the analysis.

At this point, it is important to understand the concept of cultural capital. In Wang[11] the analysis that follows describes cultural capital as "a result of constitutional rules that refer to society" and fashion, in particular, when viewed as such, also meets the criteria for "a symbol of the collective spirit".[12] Hence, even within the binary clash, fashion grants its seriousness in the form of the cultural capital. Consequently, it is now Upcycling's turn to grant its seriousness within fashion, meaning both fashion as an art category and fashion as an industry.

For Upcycling to be seen through the lens of a cultural capital would signify not only grounding its serious status but also its capacity for influence. Throughout the 20th century the velocity of changes in style caused a change in distribution.[13] Due to the multilayered character of Upcycling, if we manage to place it within the social spectrum as a fashion style, the question of a change solely in distribution is replaced by a change in the management of the product life cycle as a whole. This is because of the specific nature of Upcycling that relies on the invigorating of the last phase of a product, simultaneously

10. Andò and Campagna, "Intellectual Fashion/Fashion Intellectual: Luxury, Branding, and the Glamorization of Theory", 151.

11. Chenge Wang, "The Evolving Role of Class in Choice of Fashion in Postmodern Society," *Journal of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences*, Vol. 8 (2023),2338.

12. Wang, 2338.

13. Kira Kazanskaya, "Stylistics of Russian and European *Art Nouveau* in Costume Design, Decorative and Applied Arts", *Proceedings of the 8th International Conference on Education, Language, Art and Inter-cultural Communication* (ICELAIC 2021), Atlantis Press, 2022, 387.

signifying its reintroduction to the cycle. Another way of approaching this is by understanding the shift from discarding to placing.[14] Emgin[15] follows the description of discarding given by Hetherington which is summarized in "holding things in a state of absence". Absence, in this case, corresponds to something being out of sight, and since visual values are a prerequisite for the art status, perhaps here lies the answer for Upcycling's value, seriousness, and status.

It is harder in the case of Upcycling to claim a proper recognition, as opposed to the case of *Art Nouveau*, because the latter simply enhanced the visual sensory experience, counter to the tactile. On the contrary, Upcycling because of the element of discarding, has to rehabilitate the visual value of waste, which is in itself very controversial. The problem that arises with the subject of waste is a problem relating to the semantics of value. Currently, value is closely related to the sense of "new" in contrast to the "old". This creates an understanding of value within a linear timeline of gradual decay. Once more, I would point out the human cognitive limitation in such finite perception as is the concept of decay proportionately to our conceptualization of duality and temporality. As mentioned previously, Upcycling represents the flow from change in perception to the change in materials. This is because, first in order, comes change in the perception of value of the materials used for the creation process and their application. In the case of *Art Nouveau*, the change in materials correlated with materiality and haptics, while in Upcycling, the reduction is deeper, thus creating a two-way flow in the equation. The concern that arises when value is introduced into the discussion leads the matter to the necessity of redefinition: the redefinition of value. By abandoning the linear perception of value in favour of iterative cycles, perhaps a reorientation toward all the aforementioned binarities kicks off. Value, rather than understood as linear decay, has to be reintroduced as a process, a cycle of constant transformation. If this eventually takes place, then Upcycling could be seen through the lens of the cultural capital called fashion, since the origins of the problem rests in invaluable waste's ability to ever be recognized as fashionable.

Fashionability, i.e. the ability to be fashionable, raises questions regarding the taste. At this point, another question arises: how did we collectively go from developing an aesthetic taste to developing a taste for consumption? In the current reasoning, consumption is also interrelated to taste, and the analysis will be presented attentively, especially in terms of better understanding of the relationship between mass production, exchangeability, and replacement with no concern. In this sense fashion is closely related to obsession, consumption and decay sharing, this way, capitalistic market values which, again, are located far from the spirit. However, in the 70s, a pivotal point in the way we consume emerged. This point in history is also one of the many demonstrating capitalism's wit. The shift in traditional marketing from selling products to selling ideas was the status upgrade capitalism was seeking for itself, and it arose thanks to the shift from sponsoring culture to being the culture.[16]

But how does it relate to our understanding and overall experience of taste? In *Fashion: From Class Differentiation to Collective Selection*, Blumer unfolds the suggested tri-fold character of taste as a seeker of positive satisfaction, a sensitive selector, and a formative agent.[17] He also provides the rather eloquent definition of the origin of tastes that follows:

> "Tastes are themselves a product of experience; usually develop from an initial state of vagueness to a state of refinement and stability, but once formed they may decay and disintegrate. They are formed in the context of social interaction, responding to the definitions and affirmations given by others".[18]

In this definition one can find the implementation of the consumption character that is "multivalent

14. Bahar Emgin, "Trashion: the Return of the Disposed," *Design Issues*, Vol. 8, no. 1, (2012), 66.

15. Emgin, 66.

16. Andò and Campagna, "Intellectual Fashion/Fashion Intellectual: Luxury, Branding, and the Glamorization of Theory", 151.

17. Herbert Blumer, "Fashion: from Class Differentiation to Collective Selection," *The Sociological Quarterly*, Vol. 10, no. 3 (June 1969), 284.

18. Blumer, 284.

and nuanced".[19] It is at the same time transformational and symbolic, functional and gratifying, engaging and destructive — all of that making its essence inherently complex.[20] After all, consuming is a lifestyle experience, as is fashion, and consuming fashion is an experience that forms a specific kind of taste, more precisely accepting or rejecting something as fashionable or not. This kind of taste also perpetuates the throwaway mentality of the unfashionable. First, there is the unfashionable product in its initial reception, and second, there is the unfashionable product in the stage of fashion waste. Products described as fashionable are also products of value within the cultural capital of fashion. So, the ultimate challenge for Upcycling is to be perceived as fashionable. It is undeniably a matter of challenge, for it incorporates issues of value, taste, style, functionality and ethics. Further understanding of style as related to cognition rather than craft[21] supports the challenge, but in the mean time, it also provides the cheat sheet for overcoming it. Upcycling will be in position to overcome the challenge and claim, first the status of fashionable, and then that of style, once its practice breaks the barriers of the holistic cognition of what makes fashion fashionable, consumable and valuable. Quality crafting is not enough; it is not to sponsor style but to be the style.[22]

In contemporary fashion, aesthetics and ethics aim to finally collapse into each other. As Louise Wallenberg and Torkild Thanem argue, "That things are ostensibly good as long as they look good suggests that the aesthetization of ethics has been realized, and postmodernized, in the most crude and banal sense".[23] This implies that the distinction between good and evil, or right and wrong, has been absorbed into the realm of taste, subject to visual persuasion rather than ethical rigor. In this environment, the aestheticization of ethics becomes not just a symptom, but a strategy — one that Upcycling is called to adopt and redefine. Rather than appealing to allure as illusion, Upcycling leverages allure as authenticity, using aesthetics not to mask but to manifest ethical commitments. This transformative approach places Upcycling not only in a subcategory of design solutions, but in the realm of design philosophy: a tool to create the truth, as Goran Sundberg puts it.[24] Fashion regains its power to convince not by projecting illusions, but by making values visible through the re-evaluation of the fundamental fashion design principles, that is, colour, shape, and texture. This vision parallels the ideological core of *Art Nouveau*, which similarly sought to dismantle the boundary between decorative beauty and social function. Regardless of their century separation, both movements respond to a cultural yearning to restore sincerity to aesthetics, and to rehabilitate the everyday. It is now all a matter of beauty that is also imbued with meaning. Seen this way, Upcycling occupies also what Ezio Manzini describes as a "critical, cultural and creative dimension",[25] reflecting a shift in both the role of the designer and the expectations of the wearer. Besides, similarly to *Art Nouveau*, it affirms its critical, cultural, and creative dimension by embracing a hybrid identity–half ethics, half aesthetics, wholly design. Where allure once drew us to novelty, Upcycling reveals the not-so-self-evident truth: ethics can be worn as much as known.

Art Nouveau succeeded through its self-presentation as an intellectual hybrid that merged design principles with larger societal needs.[26] Nevertheless, the concept of functionality comes after the challenge of meeting the criteria of design principles. Within the fashion spectrum, this path from craft to art is trans-

19. Valeria M. Iannilli and Alessandra Spagnoli, "Conscious Fashion Culture," *Fashion Highlight*, no.3 (2024), 9.

20. Iannilli and Spagnoli, 9.

21. Paul Greenhalgh, "A great seriousness: *Art Nouveau* and the status of style," *Apollo. The International Magazine of the Arts*, Vol. 151, no. 459 (2000), 8.

22. Paraphrasing of "it is not to sponsor culture, but to be the culture" from Naomi Klein, *No Logo* (Great Britain: Flamingo, 2000), 49.

23. Louise Wallenberg and Torkils Thanem, "The Cost of Looking Good: Ethics and Aesthetics in the Fashion Industry in Fashion Aesthetics and Ethics: Past and Present," in *Fashion Aesthetics and Ethics*, eds. Louise Wallenberg et al. (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2023), 117.

24. Göran Sundberg, "Producing Garment, Manufacturing Fashion: On the Globalization of Industry and Disconection with Craft" in *Fashion Aesthetics and Ethics*, eds. Louise Wallenberg et al. (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2023), 85.

25. Ezio Mancini, *Design for Social Innovation in Design, When Everybody Designs* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2015), 62.

26. Paul Greenhalgh, "A great seriousness: *Art Nouveau* and the status of style," *Apollo. The International Magazine of the Arts*, Vol. 151, no. 459 (2000), 8.

lated as "from garment to masterpiece". The motives driving fashion's whole essence, existence and, I would also argue, status are two; the first manifests through the adoption of the experience of taste, and the second represents the ever-present need for belonging, or else fear of not belonging.[27] Belonging is a foundational human need that is manifested in various forms and fields. Yet, in order to answer questions of belonging through the promotion of Upcycling, we must first ask: how do we mould a taste for Upcycling altogether?

It is a matter of fact that *Art Nouveau* was not merely a stylistic movement but a cultural manifesto, emphasizing organic form, tactile engagement, and a unity between the aesthetic and the material, the experience and the truth. Its design philosophy sought to rehabilitate the world through an integration of touch, form, and ethics. Upcycling echoes this legacy by promoting a mindful materiality; garments are not just products, but sites of entanglement between maker and wearer, between ethics and aesthetics. As Sophie Woodward puts it, clothing is not a symbolic extension of identity but a constitutive element of it — we are "constituted by our clothing".[28] In this entangled experience, upcycled fashion operates with an *Art Nouveau* — like sensuality, invoking what Di Summa calls a "shared sensorial understanding".[29] Both Upcycling and *Art Nouveau* share a performative nature that engages the body and senses, cultivating a haptic dialogue between wearer and garment.

Material sensitivity is grounded in a philosophy of making, where the designer is also the craftsman, as exemplified by the outstanding example of David Pye. His belief that "where craftsmanship ends, ordinary manufacturing begins"[30] reflects the very ethos of crafts revived in both movements: that the value of an object is not only in its function, but in its making. Pye's vision was that of the craftsman-designer as the guarantor of quality and meaning. It offers a critical bridge between the artistic and the practical, just as *Art Nouveau* sought to erase the boundaries between art and craft. As a contemporary heir to *Art Nouveau*'s holistic vision, Upcycling is a practice that insists that touch, material, form, and ethics are not separable, but interdependent. It is not merely a recycling of materials, but a revival of the cultural and sensual intelligence that turns a garment into masterpiece, fashion into art.

From Deconstruction Fashion to Upcycling Fashion: the Designers Timeline

At some point in history, costume finally became boldly recognized as an organic part of decorative and applied art.[31] However, its relation to the body remained more utilitarian than anything else. Fast forward to the late sixties and early seventies where Derrida published his *Of Grammatology*, introducing most of his deconstructionist approach ideas. For Derrida, structures should be "undone, decomposed and desedimented", yet to many theorists — including himself — this is not a sufficient factor for the correlation of deconstruction philosophy with deconstruction philosophy demonstrated *in fashion*.[32] By the seventies, the concept had shifted to the 1980s and architecture, emphasizing the post-modern approach of dismantling established standards and principles. Architecture, however, was a long-established discipline of a higher status, whereas status in the case of fashion was a kind of late

27. Kira Kazanskaya, "Stylistics of Russian and European *Art Nouveau* in Costume Design, Decorative and Applied Arts", *Proceedings of the 8th International Conference on Education, Language, Art and Inter-cultural Communication* (ICELAIC 2021), Atlantis Press, 2022, 386.

28. Sophie Woodward and Tom Fisher, "Fashioning through Materials: Material Culture, Materiality and Processes of Materialization" in *Critical Studies in Fashion & Beauty*, Vol. 5, no. 1 (October 1, 2014), 4.

29. Laura Di Summa, "Touched by Fashion: On Feeling What We Wear," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 65, no. 1 (September 20, 2024), 17.

30. David Pye, *Nature and Art of Workmanship* (London: The Herbert Press, 1968), 20.

31. Kira Kazanskaya, "Stylistics of Russian and European *Art Nouveau* in Costume Design, Decorative and Applied Arts", *Proceedings of the 8th International Conference on Education, Language, Art and Inter-cultural Communication* (ICELAIC 2021), Atlantis Press, 2022, 388.

32. Agata Zborowska, "Deconstruction in Contemporary Fashion design: Analysis and Critique," *International Journal of Fashion Studies*, Vol. 2, no. 2 (October 2015), 3–4.

gratification. In contrast fashion's ultimate recognition emerged from a blend of modernist and postmodernist elements.

The first mention of "fashion deconstruction" appeared by the end of the flashy 1980s in Cunnigham.[33] The oxymoron of the simultaneous existence of modernist and postmodernist elements is evident in the authority status of the deconstructivist designers like Margiela, Rei Kawakubo, Yohji Yamamoto, Ann Demeulemeester, Dries van Noten and Galliano, whose design and manufacturing approach questioned established norms. Some were known for using deconstructionist methods throughout their careers, while other did so less frequently. One of the key features of postmodernism is the diminishing difference to authority, which in the case of deconstruction fashion is evident within the designing approach itself, but not in the way those designers were engraved in their reception and recognition of culture. It remains an intriguing are of research to explore how major designer names emerged, consolidated, and remained. Thus, while deconstruction questions the existing orders, the personalities behind it create new ones.

Though deconstruction fashion is treated here as the beginning of the timeline leading to modern Upcycling, despite sharing conceptual characteristics, they also present a wide range differences — or more accurately, shifts. If one takes into account the importance of functionality in recognizing the contribution of *Art Nouveau* as art at the time, one also cannot miss the fact that the highest prestige of fashion came with its gradual reduction of functionality. The deconstructionist approach began as a reaction to mainstream fashion of the 1980s, which was very exaggerated in its use of colours, gloss and sparkles, and feminine forms and cuts. The main idea behind the designs of Margiela, Kawakubo and Ann Demeulemeester was the independence of the fashion body and the garment,[34] stripping away all the utilitarian features. Additionally, the aim to deconstruct body forms, rather than accentuating them as in the work of early Dior, Balenciaga or Prada, did its part in provoking an aesthetic confrontation in society.[35] Further confrontational aspects are found in the shift of the colour palette from vivid hues to black, gray and white, as well as in the overall attempt to deglamourize fashion.

Then came the 1990s, as the "golden era" of fashion, followed by the 2000s, which marked the days of greatest abundance, and ultimately the 2010s and early 2020s, which can be seen as the era of luxury fashion as asset. This timeline sets the stage for drawing parallels, continuities, and contrasts of deconstruction fashion with Upcycling fashion. There exists a peculiar cyclical pattern in fashion across decades that is formed as follows: the days of the new, the days of the great and the days of grandeur. While the lines between the phases are often blurred, we can observe the scheme starting from the postwar 1940s and ending in mid-1980s, and repeating itself from the late-1980s until today. The days of grandeur are particularly relevant to the current section because they represent the ultimate fusion of concepts of status, taste and consumption. If we map these concepts onto the suggested phases, the days of the new focus on claiming status, the days of the great center on creating taste, and the days of grandeur combine both with the ultimate feeling of abundance granted through consumption.

But how can something that has gained higher status and is respected as high culture — such as designer's fashion — still be connected to something regarded as low culture — capitalism and consumption? This evolution can be understood owing to what Bourdieu called "taste for necessity". According to his analysis, the taste for necessity is a characteristic of the working class, which justifies its consumption behaviour by emphasizing the "value for money". In contrast, the "taste for luxury" is a taste emerging from and directed towards freedom.[36] Everything comes full circle by returning to the marketing shift of the seventies, from selling products to selling ideas. The suggested cycle above marks a gradual development from selling products in the days of the new, to selling ideas in the days of the great, and

33. Zborowska, 3–4.

34. Maria Skivko, "Deconstruction in Fashion as a Path toward New Beauty Standards: The Maison Margiela Case," *Zone Moda Journal*, Vol. 10, no. 1 (June 2020), 42.

35. Skivko, 44.

36. Agnès Rocamora, "Pierre Bourdieu: The Field of Fashion," in *Thinking through Fashion: A Guide to Key Theorists*, eds. Agnès Rocamora and Anneke Smelik (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015), 242.

finally combining both of the selling approaches in the days of grandeur. This is another example of capitalism's wit: selling everything to exhaustion. When societal growth is tightly connected to economic growth, and that in turn is conceived as constant, consumption is anticipated to encompass everything. The trick, then, is to shift from the "taste for necessity" to the "taste for luxury". If buying "value-for-money" products is to be considered a necessity, then buying lifestyle experiences is a luxury. In *Jean Baudrillard: Post-modern fashion as the End of Meaning*, the author describes consumption as a "systematic act of manipulation of signs driven by the logic of desire".[37] And what could be greater than claiming a desired lifestyle, grounded in materialistic abundance marketed as the ultimate experience? Again, by stripping away the utilitarian aspect — not just through design but also through marketing — we collectively shift from the manifestation of the taste for necessity to experiencing the taste for luxury. For fashion, this is ultimately achieved by granting it the status of art, not just a style in the realm of art.

Another way of understanding these cycles within artistic trends is through the logic of E. Cohn-Wiener according to whom we observe "an undefined process fluctuating between constructive and decorative trends".[38] Thus, the abandonment of functionality — constructive aspects — in favour of total reconceptualization of aesthetic rules is followed by a rebirth of constructive development, leading to ornamental practices ad infinitum. Deconstruction fashion developed as a countercultural insight, questioning, distorting and uncovering standard and non-standard concepts and practices — just as Upcycling does today. Even since the early deconstruction fashion hype, eco-fashion was seen as "deconstructing the understanding of glamorous fashion".[39] Upcycling seems to deconstruct the entire understanding of fashion, especially by re-branding the green, organic and recycled as fashionable and aesthetic.[40] Where Margiela strongly believed in the creation of new aesthetic concepts through fabric leftovers,[41] Kawakubo promoted a new degree of abstraction,[42] while Ann Demeulemeester messed with the traditional garment structure through elimination, and Galliano did so through overloading. Yamamoto remained loyal to simplicity in textures, Dries van Noten experimented with combinations, and where Miyake reformed traditional craftsmanship techniques, while Owens invented new ones. These examples lay the groundwork for understanding that moving from selling products to selling ideas is also a matter of transitioning from solving a problem to provoking reflection.

Upcycling definitely uncovers a lot of taboos and raises questions, but does it provoke genuine reflection? A popular saying in Polish goes:"co się nie dopowie, to się dowygląda", which can be rendered as "if words won't do it, looks will". Perhaps this popular sophistry summarizes why it is so vital for Upcycling to be recognized as "fashionable". The challenge posed by and for Upcycling is to boycott the immoral practices of fashion production and consumption, without, in the process, sacrificing aesthetics.[43] The deglamourization of fashion doesn't have to go hand in hand with its de-beautification. The negative correlation between attractiveness and morality is of no use here. In the Museum of Life under Communism in Warsaw, one can find the caption "Looking at nice and aesthetic things lets you see beauty, distinguishing trash from art". Since fashion has long acquired the status of art, it has also accomplished to promote a certain understanding of what is fashionable and what is not. Therefore, whatever deviates from those unspeakable standards is directly associated with — as a comrade might say — common trash.

37. Efrat Tseelon, "Jean Baudrillard: Post-Modern Fashion and the End of Meaning," in *Thinking through Fashion: A Guide to Key Theorists*, eds. Agnès Rocamora and Anneke Smelik (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015), 216.

38. Kira Kazanskaya, "Stylistics of Russian and European *Art Nouveau* in Costume Design, Decorative and Applied Arts," *Proceedings of the 8th International Conference on Education, Language, Art and Inter-cultural Communication* (ICELAIC 2021), Atlantis Press, 2022, 387.

39. Skivko, "Deconstruction in Fashion as a Path toward New Beauty Standards: The Maison Margiela Case", 44.

40. Simone Schiller-Merkens, "Will Green Remain the New Black? Dynamics in the Self-Categorization of Ethical Fashion Designers," *Historical Social Research/Historische Sozialforschung*, Vol. 42, no. 1 (2017), 211.

41. Skivko, "Deconstruction in Fashion as a Path toward New Beauty Standards: The Maison Margiela Case", 44.

42. Karen de Perthuis, "Breaking the Idea of Clothes: Rei Kawakubo's Fashion Manifesto," *Fashion Theory*, Vol. 24, no. 5 (January 7, 2019), 1.

43. Simone Schiller-Merkens, "Will Green Remain the New Black? Dynamics in the Self-Categorization of Ethical Fashion Designers," *Historical Social Research/Historische Sozialforschung*, Vol. 42, no. 1 (2017), 212.

"Fashionable" is not just about recognition; it is also a calculating act signifying respectability.[44] This act also reinforces the notion of belonging. But belonging to what exactly? The grandiose reception of fashion was always rooted in niches and subcultures. Upcycling, however, is not a product of any niche, nor does it originate from a related subculture. Beyond sole visual creativity that bears the notion of belonging, the act of reworking materials also engages in what Kopytoff calls a "process of becoming". In this sense, upcycled garments resist the total commoditization seen in fast fashion and instead gain cultural and emotional specificity. It is within their altered states that a break from generic exchangeability is reflected by promoting singularized artifacts that bear the trace of both labor and history. This symbolic transformation reinforces Upcycling's status as a material philosophy, not just a method. Modern Upcycling appears to have two crucial sources: first, the convergence of economic and environmental challenges that push for a new order across various fields; and second, a dissociation from the mass production of goods. Together, these forces drive the increasingly alienated and impoverished society toward what is called in the management domain — creative problem-solving through DIY (do-it-yourself) practices, crafting, and even technological reorientation. Promoting sustainability involves the formation of communities that share the same values and practices.[45] These communities will ultimately merge — once unthinkable — fashion with morality. [46]

In his discussion of circular fashion, Herman Stål argues that "the legitimacy of practices is what enables them to diffuse and persist".[47] Upcycling gains what is called "moral legitimacy" through its critique of waste, its emphasis on repair, and its refusal of planned obsolescence — features that are philosophical, not stylistic, in origin. While it may appear to share aesthetic ground with alternative fashion cultures through DIY and focus on personal craftmanship, Upcycling emerges not from subcultural identity-making, but from a structural critique of fashion's dominant economic model. Kate Fletcher notes that fast fashion is "not shaped by speed but by a set of business practices focused on achieving continual economic growth".[48] By reimagining this, Upcycling resists both production and consumption systems — what Fletcher elsewhere calls a rethinking of "the value systems that create the contexts in which goods are consumed".[49] It is grounded in a moral economy that departs from purely market-driven logic.

Upcyling checks all the boxes of the new community; it is a counter-culture willing to experiment with culture, after all, as *Art Nouveau* once did. Among the principles of sustainability is transparency, which correlates with ethics rather than aesthetics. But, can transparency function as a new promoter of aesthetics?[50] Ultimately, the goal of fashion is to be fashionable. If morality is to be incorporated into this concept, it should not overshadow the fashion itself. Upcycling techniques tackle the challenge of overcoming the feeling of poverty that comes from discarded resources. Interestingly, even the aesthetically questionable pieces from Balenciaga, such as the very dirty and very distressed sneakers, are known to be made from repurposed materials. This implies that a final product has the freedom to appear as aesthetically unpleasant if the materials used carry no connotations of lost value or poor quality by definition. On the contrary, a product originally made from waste and discarded materials has the opportunity to claim its reception as aesthetic once all undertones of low quality, low value, and distastefulness have been "washed out".

The ultimate process that can support this challenge begins with proper design. Deconstructionist de-

44. Herbert Blumer, "Fashion: from Class Differentiation to Collective Selection," *The Sociological Quarterly*, Vol. 10, no. 3 (June 1969), 277.

45. Valeria M. Iannilli and Alessandra Spagnoli, "Conscious Fashion Culture," *Fashion Highlight*, no.3 (2024), 10.

46. Simone Schiller-Merkens, "Will Green Remain the New Black? Dynamics in the Self-Categorization of Ethical Fashion Designers," *Historical Social Research/Historische Sozialforschung*, Vol. 42, no. 1 (2017), 211.

47. Herman Stål, "Circular Fashion: Moral Effects and Ethical Implications" in *Fashion Aesthetics and Ethics: Past and Present*, eds. Louise Wallenberg and Andrea Kollnitz, (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019), 27.

48. Kate Fletcher, "Slow Fashion: An Invitation for Systems Change," *Fashion Practice*, Vol. 2, no. 2 (November 2010), 260.

49. Tonya Boone, "Sustainable Fashion and Textiles: Design Journeys by Kate Fletcher (Earthscan, 2008)," *Fashion Practice*, Vol. 1, (2009), 274.

50. Mads Nygaard Folkman and Vibeke Riisberg, "The Aesthetics of Sustainable Design," *Proceedings of "Making and Unmaking the Environment Design History Society" Annual Conference*, Oslo, 7–9 September, 2017, 2.

signers were able to ground themselves as fashion authorities primarily due to their design skills, and good design skills come down to masterful knowledge management. To master design, one must understand the diverse stimuli leading to conceptualization, the standard design principles, and craftsmanship. Upcycling is largely re-active, which means intervening after a garment or material has entered the waste stream, yet it need not remain so. Niinimäki also emphasizes that for true systemic change, a pro-active approach aligned with closed-loop design principles must be adopted from the start.[51] If strategically embedded into early design thinking, Upcycling could evolve into such a pro-active force — bridging the gap between improvisational reuse and long-term material planning. It is, after all, a concept formed around the zero-waste rhetoric which, and although, it has multiple meanings, its strict definition points to the notion of design.[52] Since waste has become a significant concern for human societies only recently, many scientists, theorists and designers have come to the conclusion that waste is, in fact, a design flaw. The German chemist and co-author of *Cradle to Cradle: re-making the way we make things*, Michael Braungart, believes that "once everything is designed to become part of an ongoing biological cycle, we can celebrate abundance".[53]

Nonetheless, before we collectively reach the point of this celebration of abundance, it must be experienced through our senses, and following the case of *Art Nouveau*, the visual qualities must surpass the tactile ones. Collectively, we seem to have developed a taste for abundance — not just luxury. We know abundance when we see it, and once we see it, we crave it. Even if we lack the financial means, we have certainly developed an eye for luxury, whether it is loud or quiet. In this manner, should Upcycling be identified by "aesthetic coding",[54] this coding has to be supported by strong design, which is not simply a matter of craftsmanship. This distinction makes the hierarchy between art and craftsmanship clear. Crafts, and more precisely craftsmanship, are integral parts of art, yet artistic vision is not always present, even in the finest examples of craftsmanship.

In deconstruction fashion the "unfinished, coming apart, recycled, transparent, grunge"[55] qualities and characteristics are part of a wider and deeper vision, not merely byproducts of craftsmanship. Similarly, for Upcycling to establish its seriousness, a strong creative vision is necessary if morality in fashion is ever to stand on its own.

Luckily enough, there is more than a handful of designers that seem to understand the project demands. Most of them are new, and almost all of them practice outside of the world's biggest fashion houses owned by even bigger conglomerates. Once the keywords "Upcycling", "fashion", "designer", "collection" appear in the internet browser's search bar the spotlight falls on Europe and primarily on UK, The Netherlands and Germany. One of the most prominent names in the field is that of Duran Lantink,[56] who has been using unsold designer pieces, damaged clothing, as well as heaps of offcuts as his main materials even before his graduation from Gerrit Rietveld Academy in 2013. Based in Amsterdam, he is using discarded luxury garments and forms his creative vision founded on the idea of combining clothes, rather than drawing patterns.[57] Another strong mention coming from Amsterdam is known under the initials "RVDK" for Ronald van der Kemp, who is known for his "Upcycled Couture"[58] combining a wide variety of discarded materials. In the UK there are plenty of designers with different theoretical backgrounds and practical approaches. Chopova Lowena is a two-designer company (Emma Chopova

51. Kirsi Niinimäki, ed., *Sustainable Fashion in a Circular Economy* (Helsinki: Aalto ARTS Books, 2018), 105.

52. Christof Mauch, "Introduction: The Call for Zero Waste," RCC Perspectives 3, no. 3 (2016), 6.

53. Mauch, 6.

54. Mads Nygaard Folkman and Vibeke Riisberg, "The Aesthetics of Sustainable Design," *Proceedings of "Making and Unmaking the Environment Design History Society" Annual Conference*, Oslo, 7–9 September, 2017, 5.

55. Alison Gill, "Deconstruction Fashion: The Making of Unfinished, Decomposing and Re-Assembled Clothes," *Fashion Theory*, Vol. 2, no. 1 (February 1998), 25.

56. Selin Hatunoglu, "95 Percent Upcycled Materials at Duran Lantink's Spring 2024 Collection," *Lampoon Magazine*, October 4, 2023.

57. Gert Jonkers, "Duran Lantink — Designer Amsterdam," *Fantastic Man*, no. 33 (2021).

58. Fhcm.paris, "Ronald van Der Kemp — Upcycling Couture | FHCM," accessed 2025, https://www.fhcm.paris/en/news/ronald-van-der-kemp-Upcycling-couture.

& Laura Lowena-Irons) that featured in the British Vogue for its combination of dead-stock, traditional craft techniques, and design concept.[59] Another UK brand to feature in British Vogue was Marine Serre for its SS22 collection as the "Most Sustainable Collection To Date".[60] Tega Akinola, also, was interviewed for "flipping thrifted socks and cables into heels",[61] and Ahluwalia mentioned for crowd-sourcing garments.[62] Still though, it is the Berlin Fashion Week that seems to be the central point of where innovation is made into aesthetics. Just in the first months of 2025 Lou de Betoly featured in online magazines for his upcycled bed sheets,[63] Avenir Atelier was honoured with the mention of "craftsmanship as a fashion statement",[64] and Haderlump[65] was undeniably all about impressions.

The designer pool broadens more with Sweden based designers such as Germanier in the field of accessories and Hoda Kova mastering experimental fashion; in New York, there's also a patchwork and knitting technique representative under the brand name Imli Dana; Benmoyal is a French-Israeli designer weaving fabrics from audio and video tapes; Iro Iro based in India specializes in handcrafting from waste; and finally, PLNGNS from Ukraine also had their moment in Berlin Fashion Week of 2025. Viewed through the lens of circularity, these brands and designers do not merely avoid waste — they reintegrate textile life into a functional and affective loop. In this way, Upcycling can be understood as a form of closed-loop recycling (CLR) that resists energy-intensive industrial processing by maintaining both material functionality and cultural relevance.[66] By centering craft, storytelling, and slowness, they manage to transform Upcycling from an improvised tactic to a deliberate strategy — capable of redefining fashion's relationship with time, value, and the planet. Ultimately, such examples make design the conduit of disposal. Making a garment is one thing, but creating a masterpiece is another. For Upcycling to grant its place in the fashion realm is a matter of turning garments seen as common trash into masterpieces. This is the only way to break the linear decay of value and turning it into a cycle; it is also the way for incorporating function to the fashionable allowing the transition from craft to art; and lastly, it is the only way to satisfy the now unfading collective taste for luxury.

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to explore whether the peculiar phenomenon of Upcycling has historical parallels, particularly in relation to *Art Nouveau*, and to examine the criteria for its popularization and success. Both Upcycling and *Art Nouveau* present multilayered criteria that span across multiple disciplines and industries. Perhaps, the oxymoron of industrialization's contrasting logic — its resistance to industrialization and its commercial success due to it — can find compensation in the thought of political theorist Murray Bookchin, who stated that "the very technology that was used to plunder the planet can now be used, artfully and rationally, to make it flourish". What this demands is the deliberate coupling of enduring dualities — between the "high" and the "low", between value and waste, between culture and commodity. Thus, deconstruction appears to be the historical predecessor of reconstruc-

59. Daniel Rodgers, "The Magic Ingredient behind Chopova Lowena's Folkloric Kilts? Good Karma," *British Vogue*, April 22, 2024, https://www.vogue.co.uk/article/chopova-lowena-kilts-sustainable.

60. Emily Chan, "10 Upcycled Looks to Invest in from Marine Serre's Most Sustainable Collection to Date," *British Vogue*, September 27, 2021, https://www.vogue.co.uk/fashion/gallery/marine-serre-ss22.

61. Sarah Spellings, "The 22-Year-Old Designer Flipping Thrifted Socks and Cables into Heels," *Vogue*, January 27, 2022, https://www.vogue.com/article/tega-akinola-interview.

62. Emily Farra, "Priya Ahluwalia Wants Your Old Clothes: How a New Microsoft Collaboration Brings Consumers into the Upcycling Process," *Vogue*, November 2, 2021, https://www.vogue.com/article/ahluwalia-microsoft-Upcycling-collaboration-circulate.

63. B'SPOQUE Magazine | The Slightly Different Art Magazine, "Sustainable Luxury: LOU de BÈTOLY AW25 Collection," February 3, 2025, https://bspoque.com/sustainable-luxury-lou-de-betoly-aw25-collection/?v=a4b7f41804b0.

64. Chiara Rapicavoli, "Berlin Fashion Week: Avenir Blurs the Line between Atelier and Runway," *Vakuummagazin.com*, February 4, 2025, https://vakuummagazin.com/stories/avenir-berlin-fashion-week/.

65. Mark Holgate, "Haderlump Berlin Fall 2025 Collection," *Vogue*, February 3, 2025, https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/berlin-fall-2025/haderlump.

66. Kirsi Niinimäki, ed., *Sustainable Fashion in a Circular Economy* (Helsinki: Aalto ARTS Books, 2018), 98.

tion — not just of garments, but also of concepts that bring them to life. This reflects a necessary reconciliation between utility and beauty, ethics and aesthetics — a synthesis of seemingly opposing forces that Upcycling strives to embody.

Walter Benjamin's vision of fashion as a fetishized spectacle offers further contrast between fast fashion and Upcycling. In his analysis, fashion becomes a ritualistic medium through which the commodity fetish is worshipped: "Fashion prescribes the ritual according to which the commodity fetish is worshipped".[67] As Benjamin argued using Marx's words, fast fashion thrives on this cycle that identifies as "an endless chain of goods that we desire and then relinquish" — perpetuating a culture of consumption where garments are stripped of meaning beyond their immediate desirability. Fast fashion appears as an example of abundance creating meaninglessness. Whereas, there is a mockery towards death in dressing the inorganic with the illusion of vitality, Upcycling seeks not to mock but honour. It focuses on singularity, craftsmanship, narrative, and redirecting from disposability to permanence, circularity, and abundance by embedding stories into materials and garments once more.

A prerequisite for this transformation lies in the visual and discursive structures that shape taste. Roland Barthes, as cited by Paul Jobling, reminds us: "The magazine is the machine that makes fashion".[68] Again, the aestheticization of ethics poses a demand for sustainability in total not to be merely moral, but also desirable. For Upcycling has to become fashion, rather than simply a technique, a method or act, and to deeply embrace the codes of allure, glamour, and fantasy needed. Ethics, without appeal, remain unseen. Thus, the aestheticization of ethics is not a contradiction, but a necessity: Upcycling must be desirable to be desirable.

But fashion is never only visual. As Di Summa notes, fashion is also about "how we allow fashion to touch our bodies".[69] The touch of fashion is more than tactile; it is symbolic, emotional, and cultural. Fashion is not simply worn; it is experienced, performed, and embodied. Upcycling, with its heightened attention to materiality and narrative, offers a more mindful encounter with clothing — one that draws upon shared sensorial understanding and historical memory. In this regard, David Pye's words appear more suited than ever: "Unless workmanship comes to be understood and appreciated for the art it is, our environment will lose much of the quality it still retains". There is hope in Upcycling to elevate manual skill to a form of design intelligence and reconnects fashion to its material and cultural roots.

The article highlights how garments, specifically upcycled, transcend their objecthood, and become vessels of cultural and artistic meaning through affective materiality, narrative layering, and design intelligence. Fashion becomes art when it speaks to cultural memory, identity, and vision. Upcycling is more than a sustainable tactic. It is a philosophy of hope and restoration, a form of creative and ethical resistance that rejects the exploitative growth models of the past in favor of regenerative cultural practices. It articulates a future for fashion grounded not in acceleration, but in care, craft, and contemplation. Ultimately, this articles aims for Upcycling to be seen not only as a method but as a cultural carrier of legitimacy — linking past and future, industry and art, ethics and desire. Upcycling, then, emerges as a hope for those dazzled by fashion yet disillusioned by the industry behind it.

67. Adam Geczy and Vicky Karaminas, "Walter Benjamin: Fashion, Modernity and the City Street" in *Thinking through Fashion: A Guide to Key Theorists*, eds. Agnès Rocamora and Anneke Smelik (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015), 91.

68. Paul Jobling, "Roland Barthes: Semiology and the Rhetorical Codes of Fashion" in *Thinking through Fashion: A Guide to Key Theorists*, eds. Agnès Rocamora and Anneke Smelik (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015), 132.

69. Laura Di Summa, "Touched by Fashion: On Feeling What We Wear," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 65, no. 1 (September 20, 2024), 12.

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