

Dressing Up the Opera Stage: Sofia Coppola's *La traviata**

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Abstract

In 2016, Sofia Coppola directed an exemplary melodrama in the history of female representation at the opera: *La traviata*. Premiering at Rome's Teatro dell'Opera and preceded by an exclusive preview for a select few, this sumptuously staged production was enhanced by haute couture gowns designed by Valentino Garavani (for Violetta) and the brand's creative directors Pierpaolo Piccioli and Maria Grazia Chiuri. This version of Verdi's opera exhibits a hallmark of Sofia Coppola's artistic identity: hybridity and a cosmopolitan sensibility. The convergence of her sustained engagement with high fashion and her boldness in transcending cultural boundaries — manifested in artistic-productive fields unrelated or adjacent to cinema — draws upon the cosmopolitanism inherent to high fashion itself. Drawing on Angela Carroll's (2009) notion of fashion brand communication and celebrity endorsement, one may interpret Coppola's operatic venture as both a container and a showcase for the "Coppola brand." Her temporary foray into opera exemplifies her strategic use of culturally plural signs. The Valentino-Coppola collaboration reconfigures the cultural space of opera in the spirit of Verdi's Paris — the capital of the Belle Époque, of illicit comforts and pleasures —, where marginality becomes profoundly compelling and what has traditionally been deemed insignificant or unworthy — female pleasure, the ephemeral, the materialistic — is placed at the narrative center. Valentino Garavani's garments literally "dress up" the stage — alongside sets by film production designer Nathan Crowley — thereby interrogating high fashion's status as a site of Art, its traditional cultural and national borders, and even the distinction between everyday dress and theatrical costume. So pronounced was this fusion that the press dubbed the production "Valentino's *La traviata*." Coppola's opera, transformed into a theater of haute couture, links the "culturally marginal" with pop contemporaneity and expands opera's cultural space. In Coppola's vision, Valentino's costumes are, alongside Violetta, the true stars of the show. They traverse the material and symbolic terrain of the opera, echoing other costumes, other Violettas, and other eras — from Lila De Nobili's designs for Visconti's legendary 1955 *La traviata* to Anne Hathaway's striking Valentino red gown on the 2011 Oscars red carpet.

Keywords: Fashion; Opera; Sofia Coppola; Valentino; *La traviata*.

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Introduction

In 2016, Sofia Coppola signed her name to the direction of an exemplary melodrama in the history of female representation at the opera: *La traviata*. Lavishly staged, the production involved Oscar-nominated — and 2025-winning — production designer Nathan Crowley and was elevated by haute couture garments created by Valentino Garavani (for the character of Violetta) and the brand's creative directors Pierpaolo Piccioli and Maria Grazia Chiuri. The opera premiered at Rome's Teatro dell'Opera, preceded by an exclusive preview for a select audience.¹ The event brought together haute couture, Hollywood celebrities, and figures from the lyric world, thereby marking it as a phenomenon that stretches well beyond the strict confines of opera. This intermedial convergence invites reflection on what Michal Grover-Friedlander terms the “mutual attraction” between opera and cinema, two forms that, despite their distinct material bases, share a fundamental investment in spectacle, embodiment, and the staging of affect.²

The goal of this essay is to offer an original contribution to the field of fashion, film, and opera studies by theorizing Sofia Coppola's *La traviata* as a site of transmedia convergence where haute couture, female film authorship, and operatic tradition mutually reconfigure one another. Moving beyond existing scholarship that tends to treat these domains separately, it aims to demonstrate how fashion — through Valentino Garavani's designs — operates not merely as “ornament” but as a dramaturgical and narrative force, reshaping the hierarchy between visuality and vocality in opera. At the same time, the essay reframes Coppola's authorial identity within debates on celebrity culture and transnational cinema, positioning her operatic venture as yet another expansion of her branded cosmopolitan aesthetic. By foregrounding consumption, mobility, and the symbolic economies of luxury, this essay aims to advance a novel interdisciplinary framework that reconceptualizes opera as a permeable cultural space, where fashion and film cultures actively redefine spectatorship, gender representation, and the ever-shifting boundaries between high art and popular culture.

The two authors examine this convergence through a dialogue between cinematic imaginaries and high fashion traditions, between material and symbolic luxury consumption, and a taste for layered signification. They observe a centrifugal movement away from Verdi's original conception, propelled by the cosmopolitan materialism shared by both Coppola and fashion. *La traviata*, centered on female pleasure, is thus extraordinarily popularized and aestheticized in ways akin to the consumption of celebrity and high fashion alike. On the one hand, the Coppola-Valentino approach positions this lyrical work as an object of global consumption, spilling far beyond the spectatorship regimes of Rome's opera house. On the other hand, this convergence of a Hollywood task force, fashion houses, and operatic imagery reveals hidden continuities between local creative milieus: the interaction between Rome's theatrical tailoring houses and fashion ateliers discloses a transfer of themes, inventions, and traditions from fashion design to opera costume.

The Coppola Brand: Cosmopolitan Celebrity

This production of Verdi's opera displays a defining trait of Sofia Coppola's persona: her stretching across diverse artistic spheres and her heterogeneous, international geography. Coppola's occasional commitment to opera is, in fact, emblematic of her deployment of culturally multiple signs, which are key attractors of her global personality. In this *Traviata*, we witness the convergence of her expert familiarity with high fashion — an environment Coppola has consistently engaged through collaborations

1. The red carpet of *La traviata* premiere was covered by leading global fashion media outlets, including *WWD*, *Vogue*, and *W Magazine*. Attendees in Valentino creations included Kim Kardashian and Kanye West, Monica Bellucci with shoe designer Christian Louboutin, It girl Olivia Palermo, Elizabeth Hurley, Keira Knightley, fashion designer Diane von Fürstenberg, director Francis Ford Coppola, alongside Italian politicians and celebrities.

2. Michal Grover-Friedlander, *Vocal Apparitions: The Attraction of Cinema to Opera* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 3–15.

and creative projects³ — and her audacity in crossing cultural divides: between Europe and America, auteur cinema and commercial appeal, Hollywood icons and the visual rhythms of independent film, luxury brands and pop imaginaries. With *La traviata*, Coppola leverages her confidence in an artistic-productive domain foreign to cinema, albeit adjacent to it: opera. She does so by harnessing the allure of cosmopolitanism — a quality central both to her public persona (which I analyze here) and to high fashion (examined subsequently by the second author).

We may regard this directorial act — or rather, this signature — as both a container and a showcase for the “Coppola brand,” an ensemble of attributes characterized by what might be termed “cosmopolitan materialism.” This brand rests upon a network of rebounds and reverberations between films, consumption of material goods, and user-generated content.⁴ In today’s globalized world, cosmopolitanism emerges as an ideal embedded in everyday behaviors — a mode of thinking and feeling shaped by a cultural climate that valorizes subject mobility (even if only imagined) as experienced through the purchase of goods and the consumption of cultural products. This cosmopolitanism has developed through social media’s familiarization with lifestyle-related content — food, design, clothing — and has cultivated a delight in difference (that consists in exploring the geographic diversity of goods, people, and cultural products) while downplaying awareness of cultural hegemony. In this context, leisure, taste, and style are pivotal to the construction of individual identity, orienting subjects toward mundane consumptive experiences.⁵

Internationality is crucial to identification with Coppola’s persona; her multiple residences have precise anchors: a husband and a rock band in France, a genealogy in Italy, and an artistic affinity and enduring collaboration in Japan. Mobility and rootedness within sites of aesthetic and artistic experience constitute two fundamental coordinates of her brand personality.

The cosmopolitan dimension of the Coppola brand hinges on a delicate balance between an ideal of inclusivity — geographic and social — in tastes and consumption, and a logic of prestige that often entails symbolic and material inequality. Sofia’s cosmopolitanism — comprising a mobile residential habitus, an artistic expression deeply rooted in European (especially French) culture, and a 1990s-born fashion entrepreneurship — generates an aspirational regime that transcends national borders. Coppola ignites ambitions that surpass cultural differences, promotes consumption habits that convey notions of mobility and plurality, and encourages transnational connections grounded in elite feminine lifestyles and perspectives — foregrounding the necessity, and even the pleasure, of negotiating between personal freedom and cultural constraints. This theme recurs insistently across her films, atmospheres, cinematic alter egos, and appearances in fashion and lifestyle arenas.

How, then, does Coppola’s direction of *La traviata* function as a showcase? The production draws explicitly on both fashion brand communication strategies and celebrity endorsement mechanisms. That is, the Valentino-Coppola duo employs the principle that a fashion brand offers consumers a vehicle for self-expression, while simultaneously leveraging celebrity endorsement as a communicative tool and embodiment of the promoted object’s values.⁶ The entire operation not only activates the semantic sphere

3. Beyond integrating fashion into her narrative films, Coppola trained at the House of Chanel, starred in fashion campaigns, authored fashion films and documentaries, designed collections, and co-founded the brand Milkfed. She is a fashion icon, trendsetter, and regular attendee of major global fashion shows. Cf. Suzanne Ferris, *The Cinema of Sofia Coppola: Fashion, Culture, Celebrity* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2021); Caryn Simonson, “Advertising. Fashion Campaigns: Sofia Coppola’s ‘Mini-Films,’” in *The Bloomsbury Handbook to Sofia Coppola*, ed. Suzanne Ferris (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2023), 169–185.

4. Sara Pesce, “Sofia Coppola, Cosmopolitan Icon,” in *The Bloomsbury Handbook to Sofia Coppola*, ed. Suzanne Ferris (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2023), 418–433, 420.

5. See Jennie Germann Molz, “Cosmopolitanism and Consumption,” and Zlatko Skrbis and Ian Woodward, “Cosmopolitan Openness,” in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Cosmopolitanism*, eds. Maria Rovisco and Magdalena Nowicka (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011); John Urry, *Consuming Places* (London: Routledge, 1995).

6. Angela Carroll, “Brand Communications in Fashion Categories Using Celebrity Endorsement,” *Journal of Brand Management*, Vol. 17 (October 2009): 146–158, <https://doi.org/10.1057/bm.2008.42>. Brands have become embedded in the consumer psyche and offer consumers the opportunity for self-expression, self-realization and self-identity. This effect is particularly strong in fashion categories. Barriers including cynicism and increasing advertising literacy threaten traditional

of celebrity and its influence to validate the product (*La traviata*) but also uses the operatic product to reinforce the celebrity's brand.

What, then, are the defining features of the Coppola brand? This brand displays through recognizable layers and intersections co-present in her persona: from the New York indie-rock scene to California wine culture; from the initial success of her fashion line Milkfed in Tokyo — and her collaborations with Japanese artists — to creative design partnerships with international labels such as Chanel, Marc Jacobs, the 120-year-old Scottish cashmere house Barrie, loungewear brand Comme Si, and others. Her personal trajectory crosses multiple fashion and cultural capitals: New York, Los Angeles, Paris, and Tokyo — artistic and productive poles Sofia has inhabited, for varying durations, in continuous transit.⁷ Coppola's image thrives on polarity: first, between being a director (and briefly a photographer) and being photographed by renowned professionals, fans, etc.; and second, between creating icons — through the contemporary reinterpretation of Marie Antoinette or the melodramatization of Priscilla Presley — and being an icon herself, as evidenced by an overflowing autobiographical discourse that surfaces recurrently on social media, at events, and in industry journalism.

On one hand, Coppola's signature on *La traviata* activates a rich semantic field linked to fashion — encompassing style, entrepreneurship, and personality. It is a constellation of meanings that includes codes of luxury and logics of distinction, yet also incorporates a simple, natural aesthetic and a cult of denim that operates in an anti-elitist register. In the consumption of Coppola's images on Instagram or Pinterest, she emerges as an icon of refined informality. In Japan, she is a chic simplicity icon, embodying a women's global citizenship of exquisite tastes and contemporary urbanity. Filtered through Coppola's fashion sensibility, Violetta acquires all these resonances.

On the other hand, *La traviata* mobilizes the cultural capital of a director whom Pam Cook defines as “a celebrity auteur whose personal brand is a key marketing tool”⁸ and as representative of “the renewed commercial value of art cinema [...] in a culture in which directors are [...] more central to commodity production.”⁹ Embedded in this authorial stance is Coppola's specialization in portraying marginalized female figures — those suspended between admirability and deplorability — a trait shared by Violetta herself. Another authorial element lies in the fact that musical melodrama constitutes an autobiographical motif for Coppola: her Italian American roots, her grandfather's career as a composer, and her family's deep ties to filmmaking all imbue this *Traviata* with additional layers of meaning connected to heritage and transnational identity.

It is precisely because of this multilayered and authorial brand identity that Valentino invited Sofia Coppola to direct *La traviata* at Rome's Teatro dell'Opera. The couturier stated he was inspired to propose this collaboration after having long admired her *Marie Antoinette* (2006). Over the years, the director and Valentino had repeatedly intersected in the fashion world.¹⁰ Coppola conceived her staging starting from Valentino's costumes, emphasizing in her interviews¹¹ that the two protagonists of the show were Valentino and Violetta. Thus, distinct cultural industries converge: opera, fashion, cinema. And diverse

approaches to brand communications, which have traditionally relied on verbal communications and storytelling. Celebrity endorsement is recognized as a potentially potent tool in communications, with celebrities viewed as more powerful than anonymous models and campaigns tending to verbalize the meaning of the celebrity in relation to the brand.

7. A Paris apartment for creative retreat, a New York base, and a family compound in Napa Valley. Her films often feature iconic locations like the Chateau Marmont (LA), Versailles (France), and Japanese resorts, reflecting her own globetrotting and love for glamorous, historic spaces.
8. Pam Cook, “Sofia Coppola: Commodity Auteur,” in *The Bloomsbury Handbook*, 281–288, 281.
9. Pam Cook, 281.
10. Sofia Coppola wore Valentino frequently before 2016, notably a sheer black Valentino Resort 2013 dress at the 2013 Women in Film Awards (with Valentino heels) and a modified Valentino Pre-Fall 2014 embellished tunic and shorts at the 2014 Cannes Film Festival, showcasing her consistent affinity for the brand's understated elegance for red carpet events and film promotions.
11. Sofia Coppola, “*La traviata*: Sofia Coppola,” uploaded May 2016 at Opera di Roma, video 01:47, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-S1jfkfRnrs>.

cultures: the French text that inspired the Italian opera, the American director, and the costumes of an Italian fashion house.

Mobility and Consumption: Opera Expanded Through Fashion

Through the Coppola-Valentino partnership, *La traviata* symbolically exits the opera house, as demonstrated, for instance, by the proliferation of discourse in Japanese fashion and lifestyle magazines such as *Madame Figaro Japan*¹² and on Japanese social media. Japan — a solid base of Coppola's fandom — combines a fascination with a Europe of refined taste with a specific devotion to the American director. Screened in Japanese arthouse cinemas in 2017 as a cinematic event, *La traviata* became a cultural phenomenon attracting not only opera audiences but also fashion and film enthusiasts.¹³ Subsequent theatrical revivals in 2018 and 2023 confirmed its enduring success. Japanese promotional materials leveraged the audience's cinematic memory, invoking Coppola's *Lost in Translation* (2003) — set in Tokyo — which cemented a strong bond between the director and Japanese viewers.

In other words, this *Traviata* enacts a transformation of opera's cultural space — a delocalization of settings and of the very act of attending the theater — consistent with high fashion's transformative force. In Coppola's production, the operatic voice becomes a deterritorialized sign of affective intensity that migrates across media and cultural contexts. The opera house itself is reconfigured as a site of cinematic and sartorial spectacle, where Verdi's score provides an emotional soundtrack to a visual drama orchestrated through Valentino's haute couture and Coppola's directorial sensibility. This operation broadens the audience drawn to opera. Rome's Teatro dell'Opera reported its highest box-office revenues since its founding in 1880, according to its director. Non-connoisseurs from around the world — drawn more by fashion icons and brands than by Verdi's music — appreciated the explicit magniloquence of the costumes and set design, as evident in online audience comments highlighting Valentino's use of primary colors: pop colors, we might say, that seduce through intense sensory stimulation: "Violetta is a courtesan who lives for fashion and pleasure; her bond with naked appearance is a *liaison dangereuse* — affirmed from the very first image. The curtain rises, and Violetta descends a winding white marble staircase, necessary to display the aqueous materiality of the marine tulle train of her first gown — black and shimmering."¹⁴

Coppola's direction leads to exposing clothes as a performative act, charged with pathos in a way already experienced by the audiences in fashion catwalks and fashion events. We might think of Alexander McQueen, whose approach to clothes was intrinsically theatrical, often operatic.¹⁵ His distressed and deconstructed garments, architectural silhouettes, and references to Victorian gothic¹⁶ reconfigured the female body as what cultural theorists have termed a "site of disputation,"¹⁷ a space where conventional notions of beauty, femininity, and bodily normativity are challenged and contested. As in the case of McQueen, in Coppola's *Traviata* haute couture becomes dramaturgical language.

12. The magazine draws inspiration from the Parisian "art de vivre," offering high-quality fashion, interior design, and travel discoveries to sophisticated adult women. See the editor's blog: <https://madamefigaro.jp/blog/figaro-japon/180911-camelias.html>.

13. <https://eiga.com/movie/86924/>. On Filmmarks (フィルムマークス), a Japanese film review platform, 361 reviews were recorded.

14. Silvia Vacirca, "Tutte le Traviate del futuro," *Rivista Studio*, May 26, 2016, <https://www.rivistastudio.com/traviata-coppola-valentino-roma/>.

15. "Alexander McQueen: An Introduction," Victoria & Albert Museum, accessed March 23, 2026, <https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/alexander-mcqueen-an-introduction>; Robert McCaffrey, "Alexander McQueen: The Sublime and Melancholy," *The Fashion Studies Journal*, September 24, 2020, <https://www.fashionstudiesjournal.org/longform/2020/9/23/alexander-mcqueen-the-sublime-and-melancholy>.

16. Catherine Spooner, "The Gothic Vision at the Heart of Alexander McQueen's Savage Beauty," *The Conversation*, March 13, 2015, <https://theconversation.com/the-gothic-vision-at-the-heart-of-alexander-mcqueens-savage-beauty-38544>.

17. Richard Jonathan, "Alexander McQueen: Feminine, Femininity, Feminist. A Thematic Analysis of 'Plato's Atlantis', 'The Girl Who Lived in the Tree', 'Voss'," *Mara Marietta Culture Blog*, June 20, 2022, <https://www.maramarietta.com/alexander-mcqueen-feminine-femininity-feminist/>.

Delocalization, therefore, consists in evoking affective experience from outside the realm of opera. This is precisely the hallmark of cosmopolitanism in Coppola-Valentino's *Traviata*, where a bohemian atmosphere converges with aesthetic ecstasis and a contemporary cult of well-being and ease. Well-being and ease are elements of an ideal based less on material access to luxury than on its symbolic and experiential accessibility. Coppola's materialism encompasses tourism, wine, haute couture, interior design, and music, a cult of travel, urban culture, and exotic cuisine. It is consumed via social media and fashion, lifestyle, and gossip magazines. As John Urry observes, this is an aesthetic cosmopolitanism — a consumption-based cosmopolitanism stemming from the rise of mass tourism, revealed in everyday practices, attitudes, mentalities, and modes of feeling.¹⁸ It has been further amplified by social networks, which have familiarized users with immense content variety and propagated a pleasure in difference — at the expense of awareness of cultural hegemony.

Coppola's fans, through their engagement with her films and her personality on Instagram, Pinterest, and TikTok, indulge in a materialistic consumption that situates them within an international, refined geography modeled on her example. They are allowed into a global projection of “ladylike leisure”, the idle elegance of sophisticated women dwelling in refined environments. Consuming Sofia Coppola — through images of her, styles resembling hers, or a mood of calm simplicity — grants entry into a world she both belongs to and helps create.

Paris — with its refined yet democratized consumption — serves as a pole of convergence among Coppola, opera, and Europe's longstanding haute couture tradition. It is thus unsurprising that the *Traviata*'s Paris captivates audiences unfamiliar with opera. It is the capital of the Belle Époque, of leisure and illicit pleasures. *La traviata*, adapted from minor literature (*La dame aux camélias* by Dumas fils), renders fascinating a marginalized, even unworthy femininity. It gives lyrical form to female pleasure — ephemeral, materialistic. Violetta's romanticism becomes a spectacle of hedonistic, fleeting inclinations. The heroine lives a materialistic existence to its extreme consequences — precisely the kind of narrative that fashion translates into affective value, aesthetic pleasure, and a taste for mobility (even if only imagined or fictional). This romanticism also defines the femininity portrayed by Maison Valentino: sumptuous, opulent, rich in pathos. An exaltation of materiality reflected in the majestic decorations and costumes of *La traviata*:

The four gowns worn by Violetta, soprano Francesca Dotto, are Valentino creations, while Chiuri and Piccioli, creative directors of Maison Valentino, designed the rest of the cast's costumes. Dresses, not costumes. Violetta's gowns are haute couture pieces, and fashion, according to Valentino, is poignant, romantic, hieratic. Traditionally, costume should disappear, emerge from the character's depths, absorb them. Not here — in this *Traviata*, it is Violetta's toilettes that tell the story.¹⁹

This exaltation of clothes' materiality blurs the boundaries between opera and fashion spectacle. A phenomenon that finds its most emblematic contemporary counterpart in the Met Gala, an annual event that functions as a kind of “pop opera”, a ritualized performance where the red carpet is not merely a threshold but the main stage itself. At the Met Gala, celebrities wear elaborate costumes that often exceed theatricality, engaging in narrative, historical citation, and emotional excess akin to operatic roles. Just as Violetta's gowns in Coppola's production articulate her inner drama without words, so too do Met Gala ensembles, such as Lady Gaga's 2019 Valentino-pink Brandon Maxwell gown with its performative striptease or Rihanna's 2015 Guo Pei yellow cape — become self-contained acts of melodrama. The reciprocity is striking: if the Met Gala transforms fashion into opera, Coppola's *Traviata* does the inverse, it turns opera into a red-carpet event. Here, the audience's gaze shifts from listening to looking; the voice is complemented, even rivalled, by the visual rhetoric of fabric, silhouette, and brand. In both cases, the female body becomes a site of cultural negotiation, where luxury, visibility, and vulnerability

18. John Binnie and Beverly Skeggs, “Cosmopolitan Knowledge and the Production and Consumption of Sexualized Space: Manchester's Gay Village,” *The Sociological Review*, Vol. 52 (February 2004): 39–61.

19. Silvia Vacirca, “Tutte le Traviate del futuro,” *RivistaStudio*, 26 Maggio 2016 <https://www.rivistastudio.com/traviata-coppola-valentino-roma/>.

converge. The Teatro dell'Opera in Rome, for one evening in 2016, became a European cousin of the Metropolitan Museum steps because it embraced fashion as a comparable dramaturgical force.

The “Coppola Effect”: Costumes

In Sofia Coppola's *La traviata*, while Violetta Valéry's “costumes” — as the press release calls them — are haute couture creations by Valentino Garavani, the chorus costumes were designed by then-Maison Valentino creative directors Maria Grazia Chiuri and Pierpaolo Piccioli. All costumes were crafted in the Piazza Mignanelli atelier in Rome, near the historic workshop of the Sorelle Fontana. This “fashion-forward” production reunited — ten years after Valentino Garavani's 2008 departure from the maison — the founder of Maison Valentino, his longtime partner Giancarlo Giammetti, creative directors Chiuri and Piccioli, and the “coolest” director in contemporary cinema, whose expressive signature lies precisely in fashion and the female *bildungsroman*. In an interview with Teatro dell'Opera, Sofia Coppola admitted that after directing *Marie Antoinette* (2006), it was easier for her “to relate to a Parisian party girl of that era... Valentino designed the costumes, and I wanted them to stand out greatly in this work because he and Violetta are the stars of this show.”²⁰ For his part, at the press conference for *La traviata* at Rome's Teatro Costanzi, the couturier revealed: “It's an opera that has enchanted me since childhood — the music, the story, the libretto [...] And I must honestly say that the four costumes I made for Violetta took me just an hour and a half [...] There's such romanticism, such skill in the singers, such power in the staging — all far more important than any rock concert. Especially visually, it's a beautiful atmosphere to behold.”²¹ To CNN, he added that, naturally, “I tried to bring a lot of haute couture into this show.”²² In the same interview, however, Chiuri confessed she feared opera as something “dusty.” For this reason, the maison's costume design embraced lightness, achieved through layering of nude tones. Chiuri also emphasized that, unlike in fashion shows, opera features “real people” — a great opportunity to test the Valentino style “on real bodies.” This was no easy task, given opera singers' typical physiques — light-years from the skeletal frames of mannequins and especially distant from Valentino's ethereal, romantic aesthetic.

Staging Through Valentino Garavani's Costumes

In Sofia Coppola's staging, Valentino Garavani's costumes serve as the emotional and visual pivot of the production, transforming Verdi's opera into a meditation on beauty, femininity, and the ephemeral through a meticulous orchestration of fabrics, colors, and couture silhouettes — so much so that Valentino reportedly requested soprano Francesca Dotto wear towering platform heels. Rather than treating costumes as historical ornaments or subordinating them to dramaturgical needs, Valentino's gowns become anachronistic psychological extensions of the characters — especially Violetta, whose wardrobe traces her narrative arc from radiant social icon to fragile, faded presence.

The opening black costume gleams with elegant opulence echoing the music of Act I, foreshadowing her fatal destiny: a romantic gown with a cinched waist, crinoline, and an aquamarine train descends Nathan Crowley's infinite staircase — dialoguing with the score — while delicate metallic accents catch artificial light like fleeting moments of joy, bringing the starry night into the shimmering fabric. In fact, Valentino originally envisioned a much longer aquamarine train, but it had to be shortened to prevent the soprano from tripping during her slow descent. “There was a lot of discussion about this train!”²³

20. Sofia Coppola, “La traviata: Sofia Coppola,” uploaded May 2016 at Opera di Roma, video 01:47, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-S1jfkfRnrs>.

21. Valentino Garavani, “Sofia Coppola Presents her Opera Directorial Debut, ‘La Traviata,’ in Rome,” uploaded April 2021 at AP Archive, video 01:32, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C6CQQ3HBvIU>.

22. Valentino Garavani, “Valentino Brings Fashion to the Opera,” uploaded n.d. at CNN, video 00:49, <https://edition.cnn.com/videos/tv/2016/06/06/valentino-brings-fashion-to-the-opera.cnn>.

23. Kristin Tice Studeman, “Sofia Coppola Takes You Inside Valentino's ‘La Traviata,’” *W Magazine*, May 24, 2016, <https://www.wmagazine.com/gallery/sofia-coppola-valentino-la-traviata-opera-exclusive-look>.

exclaims Coppola — something, notes the opera costumier Leo Van Witsen,²⁴ that rarely occurs, as music typically reigns supreme.

Violetta's second gown, worn in the countryside setting, is white — the symbolic color of haute couture — featuring a ruffled voile *liseuse* that renders her a domestic, tender Pierrot. Facing Giorgio Germont, she becomes a Pierrot lunaire on the verge of vanishing. The body recedes into memory; she is Alfredo's immaculate projection, as he first saw her: "Un dì, felice, eterea."

The visual climax arrives with the explosion of "Valentino red" in the ball gown — strapless for Violetta's societal return, with a boat neckline and a balloon-like rear that cinches her dramatically into a deadly ruffle — at Flora's party, center stage and story, where Violetta is surrounded by funeral swarms of black-clad attendees inspired by Maison Valentino's Spring 2016 couture collection. Legend has it that the young Valentino Garavani was struck by red while attending the opera in Barcelona. The memory of those vermilion, powerful, hieratic figures revealed to him the virtues of the color. From 1968 to 2005, he presented at least one garment in that shade each season.

Finally, in Act III, Violetta wears a surprising silk nightgown with tulle sleeves filled with silk roses, set against a blue scenography. Mirroring the narrative — and as in *Marie Antoinette* — Violetta gradually sheds her formal, sumptuous attire, concluding her brief life — like a butterfly's flutter — in a silk nightgown that embraces both her love for Alfredo and her awareness of death. These gowns, evoking 19th-century Paris in silhouette, remain unmistakably modern, marked by Valentino's romanticism: soft tulle, refined lace, and elongated lines that emphasize grace over excess: "The costumes for *La Traviata*. They had to be timeless and at the same time loyal to the spirit of the opera. They are not only costumes — they are Haute Couture dresses."²⁵

Valentino's designs recall those of the so-called "Callas *Traviata*," with costumes and sets by the brilliant Lila De Nobili — lost under unclear circumstances — but reconstructed from original sketches thanks to the Pasquinelli Foundation and La Scala Academy. Visconti had foreseen this legacy in a letter to Meneghini, Maria Callas's then-husband: "All future *Traviatas* — writes Visconti to Meneghini — will soon, though not immediately (for human presumption is a hard defect to erase), carry a bit of Maria's *Traviata*. A bit at first; then (when enough time has passed to avoid direct comparisons) more; then, everything. Future Violettas will be Maria-Violettas. It is inevitable in art when someone teaches others — Maria taught."²⁶

The Opera Stage as Theater of Haute-Couture

Coppola's cinematic sensibility is evident in how she frames the costumes. They move weightlessly, reinforcing the dreamlike atmosphere of the salons. In Act I, Violetta's gown is voluminous yet ethereal, signaling both her status as a famous, sophisticated courtesan and the emotional distance she maintains behind elegance and charm. As the opera progresses, the costumes lose monumentality, mirroring the shrinking of Violetta's world. Always, they contrast her — without mediation — against her surroundings. In the pastoral interlude with Alfredo, Valentino shifts to lighter constructions with fluid, pale fabrics suggesting intimacy, vulnerability, and a fleeting hope for purity and domestic happiness. These gowns allow Violetta's body to emerge — defying philological expectations — highlighting Coppola's focus on private emotions over public spectacle. The chorus costumes, equally refined, create a visually cohesive environment where society appears exquisitely dressed, conformist, and emotionally rigid — contrasting sharply with Violetta's growing fragility. In the final act, the transformation is devastating in its sobriety: fabrics dissolve. Valentino uses the language of haute couture to communicate loss, as if the costumes themselves silently vanish alongside Violetta's life. Throughout the production, the garments do not merely clothe the singers — they breathe, float, and respond to the music, becoming part of the opera's emotional rhythm. Coppola's minimalist, symbolist staging allows Valentino's couture to

24. Leo Van Witsen, *Costuming for Opera* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981).

25. Kristin Tice Studeman, <https://www.wmagazine.com/gallery/sofia-coppola-valentino-la-traviata-opera-exclusive-look>.

26. Giovanni Battista Meneghini, *Maria Callas mia moglie* (Milan: Rusconi, 1981), 193.

shine, elevating costume to narrative language. In Coppola's *La traviata*, as in her films, fashion and storytelling are inseparable; every gown is simultaneously memory, desire, and inevitability — and beauty, like youth, is exquisitely temporary. Substance — true to fashion “ethos” — resides in the “surface,” crystallized in Violetta's four haute couture costumes/gowns.

Yet Valentino's *La traviata* deliberately departs from Verdi's historical setting, presenting contemporary fashions infused with echoes of past styles and images. Valentino's sketches draw on both current and past Maison Valentino collections and memories of the Traviatas of his youth — especially the famed 1955 “Callas Traviata,” directed by Luchino Visconti with costumes and sets by the brilliant Lila De Nobili.

The colors of Garavani's costumes — and especially those of the chorus — echo Maison Valentino's Winter 2016 Couture collection: a highly theatrical cape proposed by Chiuri-Piccioli as a cloak for Violetta at Flora's party remained confined to the runway, as Valentino refused to use it. It was later worn to greater effect by Lady Gaga, a Valentino ambassador.

Moreover, the silhouette of Violetta's red gown recalls that of Anne Hathaway's archival piece worn for 2011 Oscars' red carpet and belonging to Valentino's Winter 2002 Couture collection. Indeed, Valentino lamented that soprano Francesca Dotto was not thin enough; the couturier would have preferred she perform in high-platform heels to elongate her silhouette, as shown in the moodboard published in *W Magazine*.²⁷

The red hue and silhouette of Violetta's gown also echo the Italian operatic tradition, recalling the costumes from Luchino Visconti's 1955 *La traviata* at La Scala, starring Maria Callas. Designed by Lila De Nobili, these costumes — like few others — capture the spirit of an era, informed by literary study, artistic interest, and dialogue with painters from Velázquez and Goya to Delacroix and the Impressionists. Her illustrations evoke Boldini and Tissot so vividly that costumier Piero Tosi remarked: “Her touch is not that of a human hand; it is that of a butterfly [...] butterfly dust dappled on paper.”²⁸

Due to her father's business, De Nobili spent her adolescence in grand European and New York hotels. She later moved to Rome, studying Decoration at the Academy of Fine Arts. In 1943, she went to Paris, attending the Académie Ranson, and debuted in the 1940s as a fashion illustrator and interior decorator. She collaborated with *Vogue* (drawing Molyneux collection figurines) and designed memorable windows for Hermès, introduced through her uncle and mentor Marcel Vertès, who deeply influenced her style. It was Christian Bérard — a successful painter, set designer, and illustrator — who steered her toward theater. Upon Bérard's death, Jean Cocteau claimed Lila became his most direct heir.²⁹

Alongside her theatrical work, De Nobili designed costumes for cinema, collaborating with Raymond Rouleau and Michel Boisrond on *Amours Célèbres* (1961). She maintained a close relationship with director Luchino Visconti, designing sets for *Come le foglie* (1954) and *La traviata* (1955). Their trust allowed her to influence directorial choices, as seen in a letter to Visconti: “I'm sending you this photo of Sarah Bernhardt: she looks a bit like a ghost, but I think it's the right era for *La traviata*. Thank you for thinking of me for this work.”³⁰

The period's corseted fashion accentuated Callas's dramatic weight loss — over thirty kilos the previous year — showcasing her new figure. Sarah Bernhardt as Marguerite Gautier and Maria Callas as Violetta are two celebrities who achieved great success in these roles wearing the “bustle dress” fashion of the 1870s. In De Nobili's delightful *Traviata* figurines, the veiled luminosity of costume and set sketches

27. Kristin Tice Studeman, <https://www.wmagazine.com/gallery/sofia-coppola-valentino-la-traviata-opera-exclusive-look>.

28. Lila De Nobili, *Dream Materials. Theatre, Opera, Painting*, exhibition catalogue edited by Errikos Sofras (Athens: The “other” Arcadia Foundation, 2025), 5.

29. Lila De Nobili, 107.

30. Irene Baldeschi, “Il Genio della Donna — Conferenza del 27 novembre 2023,” uploaded November 2023 at Città metropolitana di Bologna, video 28:30, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nHaw_LL99To&t=1939s.

is enchanting: “The most refined and seductive,” as musical director Carlo Maria Giulini described them.³¹

The 1955 *Traviata* entered Italian operatic legend due to Visconti's groundbreaking direction, Callas's vocal and dramatic power, and its unprecedented historical setting, which granted the singer greater physical freedom — such as the iconic moment when she loosened her hair and, in a frenzy, tossed her slippers into the air. In De Nobili's *Traviata*, the oppressive rigidity of sets and costumes subtly conveys the hypocrisy and cynicism of the main characters.

Her now-legendary costumes are frequently referenced by fashion designers and film costumiers imagining Violetta — such as Catherine Martin, who dressed Nicole Kidman's courtesan Satine in *Moulin Rouge!* (2001). Satine's red gown — satin corset and matching skirt, lined in black polyester, with a butterfly bow trailing swallow-tail points instead of a traditional bustle — was, according to Martin, “striking in its simplicity and sculptural form. There was nothing to hide behind. It had to be performed with confidence.”³² The costume recalls Scarlett O'Hara's red gown at Ashley Wilkes's birthday party in *Gone with the Wind* (1939), designed by Walter Plunkett — and possibly also Zsa Zsa Gabor's in John Huston's *Moulin Rouge* (1952), designed by Elsa Schiaparelli. Satine wears the red gown while singing “One Day I'll Fly Away” — literally translated into the butterfly on the gown's back — and the “Elephant Love Medley” with Christian. This duet marks the film's turning point, where action and camera movement slow, and the tragic love story takes center stage.

On the Cosmopolitan Genius of Fashion

In *The Enlightenment and Why It Still Matters*, cultural historian Anthony Pagden explains how and why the ideal of a universal, global, cosmopolitan society became central to Western imagination during the Enlightenment, and how these ideas have since contended with inward-looking, tradition-bound worldviews. Cosmopolitanism is an ancient creed; in its modern form, however, it emerged from the Enlightenment attempt to forge a new “science of man,” based on a vision of humanity composed of autonomous individuals freed from the constraints of custom, prejudice, and religion. According to Pagden, the first to declare “I am a citizen of the world (Kosmo-polites)” was Diogenes the Cynic — the philosopher who wandered Athens in a barrel seeking an “honest man.” Despite fierce criticism in the 19th and 20th centuries — when it was condemned as “a form of immorality” for betraying national ideals — cosmopolitanism has tenaciously endured, remaining foundational “to the belief in the possibility of genuine international law.”³³

Fashion maintains a complex relationship with this ideal. Although Kant saw the French Revolution as proof of humanity's progress toward cosmopolitan existence, “between 1793 and 1794 the Committee of Public Safety, dominated by the ‘incorruptible’ Maximilien Robespierre [...], sought to transform France into a ‘virtuous Republic’ that would replace morality for egoism, honesty for love of honor, principles for conventions, duties for decorum, the empire of reason for the tyranny of fashion.”³⁴ Yet thousands lost their heads — not only aristocrats — not so much to the “tyranny of fashion” as to Madame Guillotine, the “National Razor.”³⁵

Another contradiction arises, according to Stephen Adam Schwartz, in Baudelaire's conception of two cosmopolitanisms: “A strict opposition between understanding a set of customs, norms and values, on

31. Damiani, De Nobili, Tosi. *Scene e costumi. Tre grandi artisti del XX secolo*, exhibition catalogue (Rome, January 27-April 2, 2006), Lausanne: Skira, 2005.

32. Christiane Allaire, “20 Years Later. ‘Moulin Rouge!’ Is Just as Fabulous as Ever,” *Vogue UK*, May 17, 2021, <https://www.vogue.co.uk/fashion/gallery/moulin-rouge-20-year-anniversary-catherine-martin-costumes>.

33. Anthony Pagden, *The Enlightenment and Why It Still Matters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 5.

34. Pagden, 315.

35. Pagden, 315.

the one hand, and being entirely and wilfully ignorant of them in order to ‘*sentir*,’ on the other.”³⁶ From this perspective, the “individualist” cosmopolitanism Schwartz identifies — in both production and reception of artworks — has always been a fundamental passage in cultural history.

In Baudelaire’s aesthetic essays, fashion’s cosmopolitan dimension emerges vividly. For Baudelaire, modernity itself is inseparable from mobility, spectacle, and cultural exchange. He places fashion at the heart of modern experience, describing it as the ephemeral, contingent counterpart to the eternal — a superficial phenomenon that nonetheless reveals deeper truths about the present. Fashion, for Baudelaire, is cosmopolitan because it thrives in the city — a space of encounters, crossings, and heterogeneity — where styles rapidly circulate across national, class, and cultural boundaries.

German critic Walter Benjamin extends and radicalizes Baudelaire’s insights, situating fashion within the mercantile culture of modern capitalism. In *The Arcades Project*,³⁷ he interprets fashion as a site where historical time collapses and the archaic returns in new forms. This temporal layering grants fashion a cosmopolitan dimension that is not merely spatial — rooted in global exchange — but historical, as past civilizations and foreign cultures are continually reactivated in modern dress.

Benjamin’s Parisian arcades offered colonial goods, exotic motifs, and industrial techniques within a shared urban imaginary. Yet for Benjamin, fashion’s cosmopolitanism is ambivalent: it reflects capitalism’s homogenizing forces while simultaneously — through fashion’s capacity to travel, be imitated, and transformed — destabilizing fixed notions of national or cultural purity. Together, Baudelaire and Benjamin reveal fashion as a privileged site of cosmopolitan modernity, where local and global, present and past, converge on the lived body without mutual exclusion. Importantly, fashion does not merely mirror cosmopolitan life — it actively triggers it, shaping how individuals experience the city, recognize one another as modern subjects, and imagine themselves as part of a perpetually moving world. In this sense, fashion becomes a form of lived philosophy, translating abstract ideas of modernity, transitoriness, and universality into the daily practices of dressing — making cosmopolitanism visible, tangible, and embodied.

Conclusion

Thanks to her profound ties to high fashion, Sofia Coppola curates a cosmopolitan experience in which luxury and layered styles — past and present — function as both material presence and symbolic discourse. This endeavor relies on a fundamental transfer of material resources and imaginaries activated between Rome’s fashion ateliers and theatrical costume workshops, as seen in the “Valentino red” gown — steeped in operatic memory — and the ever-present Callas-inspired references circulating in fashion. This proximity between creative milieus lies at the origin of this *Traviata*’s costume design, where theatrical and cinematic memories merge with high fashion logics.

By uniting opera, cinema, fashion, and celebrity culture, Coppola-Valentino transforms Giuseppe Verdi’s opera into a space of consumption where multiple symbolic systems intersect, redefining the opera house as a permeable and dynamic environment. This partnership reactivates Verdi’s Paris as a feminine space of seductive marginality. Violetta’s pleasure, ephemerality, and materialism — historically dismissed as insignificant or morally suspect — are elevated to narrative and visual prominence. Female subjectivity, traditionally disciplined by operatic conventions, is reformulated through the languages of fashion, glamour, and celebrity. Haute couture gowns, alongside sumptuous sets, “dress” the stage in a way that destabilizes traditional distinctions: between high art and popular culture, between costume and everyday dress, between national and cultural borders. The press’s renaming of the production as “Valentino’s *La traviata*” is thus not entirely inaccurate; it captures a symptom of this deliberate contamination. By transforming opera into a “theater of haute couture,”

36. Stephen Adam Schwartz, “Baudelaire’s Two Cosmopolitanisms,” *Irish Journal of French Studies*, Vol. 21 (October 2021): 85–98, 4.

37. Walter Benjamin, *I “passages” di Parigi* (Turin: Einaudi, 2010).

Coppola connects the historic enclave of haute couture and the aristocratic ritual of opera-going with pop contemporaneity, allowing Violetta to resonate across eras and media.

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