

Introduction. Fashion and Celebrity Culture: Body Spectacle and the Enlarged Sphere of Show Business

Pamela Church-Gibson* Sara Pesce†

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For about a century, the fashion industry has actively participated in the progressive expansion of the show business' sphere of action. It was not only the impact of Paris couturiers, the London tradition of tailoring and garment construction and New York design – to mention the most important – that intermingled with the construction of cinema stars' personae in the U.S. and Europe, arguably beginning in the 1920s, but a phenomenon already apparent in the period of silent films. When, in the aftermath of WWII, garment design and manufacture developed into an industrial system and fashion marketing expanded together with the spectacle of fashion (see, for example, the evolving style of *passerelles*) the egalitarian imagination, on the one hand, and a widespread fascination with self-presentation, on the other, became motives fueling the engine of show business, its communication, behavior, and texts. Consequently, the consumption of entertainment stretched far beyond cinema and television screens, theatres and official events, reaching out to both private spheres and personal style choices, supported by the massive success of the linked marketing politics of high fashion brands, which started in the 1990s.

In the new millennium, the interaction between fashion and show business received an enormous boost through the internet, due to Youtube, the massive expansion of social networks, and the domestication of entertainment. The last two decades have been marked by the dissemination and the massive availability of information about fashion products, fashion sites and events, and, most of all, about fashion personalities: designers, models, art directors, publicists. Widespread accessibility to fashion imagery and tangible assets has intermingled with other pleasures deriving from show business, from films to red carpet events. Conflating with movie watching, award ceremonies, publicity, and gossip, the viewers' expanded attention to fashion items has had a great impact on the general notion of *what* public personalities are and what they look like. It has contributed to the tremendous expansion of interest in celebrities and the enlargement of their number. It has exploded the ambition of the hitherto unknown to increased and tangible public self-exposure. It has enlarged the spectators' experience of leisure and the possible spaces of spectacle.

Fashion was born when couture inhabited restricted, private, and aristocratic conclaves. Now, expertise about clothing, style and image creation has entered the sphere of spectacle and entertainment. Fashion

* London College of Fashion (United Kingdom); Corresponding Author: p.church-gibson@fashion.arts.ac.uk

† Università di Bologna (Italia); Corresponding Author: sara.pesce@unibo.it

creates images and codes through which celebrities are conceived and exposed. Fashion forges the celebrity text. In the new millennium “our lives, our intellect, our religion, our creativity, our sexuality are all the vocabulary of fashion and are open for renegotiation and representation. Yet, we view fashion as suspect, insubstantial, the stuff of dreams, not reality.”¹

This could also be said of contemporary celebrity itself, which shares with fashion an ambivalent status, halfway between materiality and insubstantiality, where narration plays a pivotal role. The general public’s enjoyment, contempt, and denigration of celebrities is based on personal narratives: stories about celebrities’ private lives, about their bodies and their various activities: aesthetic surgery, clothes, technologies. Celebrities can be generated outside the world of show business, just as crimes, scientific discoveries, or political statements can easily be turned into entertainment and spectacle. The artist-as-celebrity, going back to Oscar Wilde if not earlier, has been joined by the artist as *fashion* celebrity, a phenomenon that arguably started with Andy Warhol, while the past twenty years have seen the emergence of the *sporting* ‘fashion celebrity’; musicians from every genre can now be part of the new fashion spectacle, if of course they are suitably photogenic. The general attraction of a myriad number of celebrities, hybrid, hardly definable, open to dispute, has inflated and rendered more *visible* the sphere of entertainment.

This journal issue, devoted to the convergence between celebrity culture and fashion culture, investigates the modes of verbal and visual narrations revolving around attractive personalities. How does this narrative factor, which supports the celebrity system, operate within and influence the world of fashion, and how have the stories about fashion (films, biographies, but also publicity, gossip, events, spaces, architecture) influenced the world of show business?

The authors tackle, from different angles, the ambivalences of the notion of ordinariness vs. exceptionality, setting them against the background of contemporary communication, publicity, social networking, and social environment.

They bring to the fore, for example, the activities of non-conventional communication located in urban spaces but also, and especially, branded entertainment, where brands produce entertainment contents that seem to be free from promotional purposes and at the same time are more similar to audiovisual fictional languages (Antonioni). Also, fashion branding is set against the background of the global fashion industry of the digital era and informational capitalism, where consumer buying, communicational, and representational behavior are being constantly renegotiated (Sanchez-Aguileira) and a brand can stand for just the clothes themselves, conveying extraordinary ordinariness, private, liberal personhood.

Considering the crucial role of fashion publicity in nurturing the cult of celebrity, fashion magazines are unavoidable study cases, as with *Vogue*’s producing the iconicity of female stars, by framing them as extensions of the most celebrated fictional characters that they have played on screen (Granik). In this respect, the relationship between celebrity and fashion can be seen as a two-way relationship (Martina and Vacirca). Celebrities lead the trends and have their guaranteed places in the front row. They are not only used at the retail end of the market by luxury brands, influencing consumer behavior, but they have also become a very important strategic asset for fast and luxury fashion industry. Historical insight in Italian culture also emerges, as in the analysis of the impact of the cult of celebrity on the ready-made clothing market – through sales testimonials’ campaigns (Caffaro). In the international arena, fashion testimonials can reveal how a powerful image can be fluid (Colet), forged by changing looks and styles on social networks like Instagram, Twitter, Facebook and Tumblr or sanctioning powerful outfits that underline their status of influencer. While considering success and achievement as celebrity’s premises, investigation of a musical group’s entry into the mainstream (Militello) can reveal the ethics and cultural environments involved in the process of becoming influencers.

Finally, the use of specific clothing styles to negotiate rising celebrities’ public acclaim – as in the case of the transformation of young idols – discloses recurring elements in the mutual influence between fashion and teenage stardom (Landrini).

¹ Annette Lynch, Mitchell Strauss, *Changing Fashion: a Critical Introduction to Trend Analysis and Meaning*, p. 1.