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Reading *Arbiter*. Researching the Italian Menswear Fashion System on the Space of the Page

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Abstract

The paper presents the experience of researching *Arbiter*, the first Italian magazine dedicated to men's fashion. From 1935, the magazine performed its agency in relation to the Italian menswear system, entering wider debates on national and gender identity. The research leading to this paper would not have been possible without the access to the Ermenegildo Zegna Historical Archive, a corporate archive that allowed to analyse the magazine in its complete collection and to reconstruct the context surrounding it, thanks to sources such as pattern books, oral history transcripts, advertising campaigns and private correspondence. The paper will present *Arbiter*, reconstructing the context in which it was developed in the period 1935–1952. By concentrating on the micro-history of *Arbiter*, the paper will highlight the importance of fashion object in the historical research on socio-political and cultural issues. This leads to considering the value of the places where these objects are archived, preserved and made available for researchers, with the possibility to draw interesting trajectories and research paths. The ultimate aim is to reflect on the archive where this collection is kept, presenting it as a particular kind of corporate archive preserving the brand's heritage and holding resources informing a research aiming at understanding the complexities behind the meaning of Italian Style as discourse and practice.

Keywords: Arbiter; Men's Magazines; Menswear; Ermenegildo Zegna; Fashion Archives.

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Arbiter in context

> *Arbiter* comes from the relics of an old publication, with the firm proposition to free our country from one of its last vassalages .... It goes alongside other initiatives, set not only to create a precisely Italian fashion and style for men; it also serves a new and necessary industrial sector that is conquering a field forgotten by men till now.[1]

Arbiter was founded in 1935 by Gino Magnani and Mario Soresina, an editor and an artist working in Milan as part of the publishing house Anonima L'Editrice. Soresina had previously worked as an illustrator for other magazines, such as *Per Voi Signora* and *Risorgimento Grafico,* and had campaigned for the institutionalisation of fashion in other publications;[2] Magnani was editor of a number of publications linked to "masculine" activities and related artifacts: *Motociclismo*, *L'Auto Italiana* and *Motonautica*.[3]

As stated in the manifesto, *Arbiter* was the evolution of another magazine dealing with men's clothing, called *Lui* [*Him*] founded in 1932. The fundamental difference from the previous magazine — or other magazines focusing on men's clothing — was *Arbiter*'s direct affiliation with textile manufacturers and tailors on one side, and with the fascist regime on the other. Its position at the intersection of these forces motivated its core aim: establish a fashion for men that was unmistakably Italian.

The affiliation with textile manufacturers was fundamental in the development of *Arbiter*'s specific language, and in the individuation of its main battle: to break the supremacy — what *Arbiter* itself called "vassalage" — English textiles had in the Italian market. One of the very first supporters of the publication was Ermenegildo Zegna, head of one of principal wool mills in the Biella region, in the north-east of Italy, where most woollen goods for men were produced. Not only did Zegna provide monetary support and materials for the publication, but he was also the one who, some years before the publication of *Arbiter*, prepared the ground to break the aforementioned vassalage.

At the beginning of twentieth century, the fame English textiles had in Italy was indeed supported by an effective superiority in the quality of the products, which came from the easy access to raw materials, but also from new technologies and machinery developed by English weavers.[4] Between 1932 and 1934, Ermenegildo Zegna decided to invest on the technological side, establishing relationships with English mills and sending his technicians to learn techniques in England. He also called English mechanics to furnish his mill with English machines and expertise.[5] For Zegna, focussing on quality was a good intuition: as Antonio Gramsci had reluctantly theorised some years before, Italy was a nation poor of raw materials, which could succeed in the production of goods for the luxury market.[6] By 1934, the technologies in place in Biella were almost the same as those used in England, and the Zegna mill was ready to compete with English products, at least on the qualitative side.

The emancipation of Italian textile production from the English one went alongside the self-sufficiency policies put in place by the fascist regime. On 14th January 1929, a law decree was released, requiring public authorities to only purchase domestic products, regardless of their cost. The position became more extreme in the thirties, above all in response to the economic sanctions imposed by the League of Nations in November 1935 after the Italian invasion of Ethiopia: Autarchy was proclaimed by the Duce, to free

1. *Arbiter*, Issue 1, May 1935, 10. This translation and all the other included in the paper are the author's own.
2. Mario Lupano, Alessandra Vaccari, *Una Giornata Moderna (Fashion At The Time Of Fascism)* (Bologna: Damiani, 2009), 7.
3. The titles translate as: *Motorcycling, The Italian Car* and *Speedboat.*
4. Sue Bowden, David Higgins, "Much Ado About Nothing? Regional Business Networks and the Performance of the Cotton and Woollen Textile Industries, c.1919–c.1939," in John F. Wilson and Andrew Popp, *Industrial Clusters and Regional Business Networks in England, 1750–1970,* (Aldershot, Burlington: Ashgate, 2000), 109.
5. Aldo Zegna, interview conducted by Anna and Gildo Zegna (Trivero, 2007).
6. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Prison Notebooks*, (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971), 308. Investing in quality is actually a possibility abhorred by Gramsci, and the definition of quality itself is considered by him as a "formula for idle men of letters and politicians whose demagogy consists in building castles in the air."

Italy from "the greatest extent possible of foreign servitude."[7] Although proven unsuccessful, mainly because of the many difficulties in containing the black market, the autarchic policies managed to give some of the industrial sectors the support needed to invest in technological innovation and research. Autarchy was seen and publicised as a possibility to succeed in fields that were before prerogative of other nations; *drapperia* — the name used to indicate woollen textiles designed especially for men's clothing — was, of course, one of these.

After reaching a good level of quality in production, what was missing in Italy was a promotional apparatus. Ermenegildo Zegna's involvement in the foundation of *Arbiter* came after the understanding that what his products were lacking, in respect to the English ones, was essentially a narrative. As underlined by Aldo Zegna, son of Ermenegildo Zegna, in an oral testimony collected by his nephews in 2007, four were the characterising features of English textiles: image, quality, creativity, and service.[8] The definition he gave of "image," as "the position you hold in the mind of the consumer, which then forms the idea the consumer has of you and your products," stressed how the recognisability of the name could benefit the promotion of products. To illustrate his point, he brought the example, once again, of the English system; personalities and products were part of a mythology built around menswear. in his testimony, Aldo Zegna accounted the role of the "image makers" [*formatori di imagine*] in the establishment and recognition of the value of the items. The Prince of Wales was undoubtedly one of them, together with Anthony Eden and other public personae whose image was widely renowned at home but, above all, romanticised — and branded — abroad. Zegna's idea was that the whole English environment favoured the promotion of the "image" of English textiles and therefore of English fashion; it was this image that allowed the industry to flourish economically and also technologically. In this sense, another ground on which to challenge English production was that of visual culture.

Fashion images, as fashion itself, were part of a narrative developed by the Fascist regime to visually and aesthetically control the people.[9] As argued by Craig Calhoun, nationalism often constructed "categorical identities," based on ethnicity, to "demarcate political communities."[10] In Italy, both objects and narratives were instrumental in crafting a strong sense of national identity: everything had to be Italian, from raw materials to the final product, and products had to be strongly marketed as Italian. Manufacturers interpreted this ideological move as the necessity to reclaim the nationality of their products.

> We began our campaign for the promotion of Italian fabric, a campaign that will continue with obstinate certainty of being able to win. ... no other publication has ever faced the problem with our vigour.[11]

The statement made by Magnani in a letter to Zegna dated June 1936 proudly looked back at the first year of *Arbiter*. The Duce himself deemed 1935 as the "crucial year," foreseeing the glorious future he envisioned for Italy under fascist dictatorship.[12] From the very first issues, *Arbiter* declared its willingness to be part of the Duce's heroic project. In issue 2, Soresina solemnly wrote:

> *Arbiter* has chosen, to be born, the time that prepares the way for the advent of Italian masculine fabric on the World scene. It will be an uproarious triumph.[13]

Still, in 1935, Italian woollen goods for men had to be advertised as English in order to be sold. From this came the decision to develop marketing strategies centred on "name" and "provenance" in order to create a notion of quality linked to the national character of the materials. The first claim of paternity was, indeed, material. Since 1929, Ermenegildo Zegna was in close conversation with other manufacturers and with the

7. Benito Mussolini's Speech to the National Assembly of Corporations, 23rd May 1936.

8. Aldo Zegna, interview (Trivero, 2007).

9. Lupano and Vaccari, *Una Giornata Moderna,* 9.

10. Craig J. Calhoun, "Nationalism and Ethnicity," *Annual Sociological Review,* 19 (1993), 211.

11. Letter by Gino Magnani to Ermenegildo Zegna, 15th June 1935, Archivio Fondazione Ermenegildo Zegna (AEZ) F 611 f 2819.

12. "L'anno cruciale," Mussolini's Press Statement, *Il popolo d'Italia,* 8 January 1935.

13. *Arbiter*, Issue 2, June 1935, 11.

Fascist Wool Association, to start marking his textiles with his logo.[14] Zegna was the first manufacturer who decided to impress the name of his brand on the selvedge of the cloth, a process documented since 1933 with images and a video shot in the Zegna mill by Istituto Luce.[15]

> I think that when you know how to work well you should not fear anything and you should not be afraid to give authorship to products that are so good. I could be mistaken, but I have the conviction that your decision is destined to greater success.[16]

This was written by Magnani to Zegna, after assisting to a meeting between Zegna and one of his collaborators on the marking of textiles by A.D.A.M, one of the sub-brands produced by the Zegna wool mill. The fact that the editor was present to this meeting is significant, above all considering the centrality the marking had in the content and visual language of the magazine. The advertisement for A.D.A.M. textiles, designed by artists part of *Arbiter* editorial team most probably in collaboration with Zegna himself, featured a dagger made from different swatches of textiles breaking the chain of "made in England." The advertisement was published for the first time in issue 8 (January 1936) to illustrate the article called "The Great Truth."[17] This article followed another one published in the previous issue, titled "the big lie."[18] Both articles were themed around the lies Italian manufacturers had to put up with in order to sell their products, even to their fellow countrymen. "The great truth" was especially positive in saying that these lies were no longer necessary, thanks to the fascist government and its policies of valorisation of autochthone productions; to manufacturers unashamed of being Italian, such as Zegna; and finally, due to *Arbiter* itself, whose efforts to praise the names of Italian producers marked one of the first steps into the general battle against *esterofilia* — the love for all things foreign — perpetrated by the institutions. Anonymity was inherently against the Italian project of self-sufficiency; textiles had to be labelled, because "The reputation of your name and the name of your factory is to let the world know the genius and the Italian power."[19]

It is interesting to see how the editors crafted their definition of Italian Style throughout the period 1935–1952. The Fascist regime had tried to shape society claiming that the words "fascist" and "Italian" were synonymous, and *Arbiter*'s language was also shaped around the promotion of the Italianicity of products, attitudes and people alike. This made it problematic for the magazine, to keep its relevance after the fall of Fascism. However, the editors decided to exploit the performative character of language, which allowed them to continuously reterritorialise the ideological meaning of Italianicity. The recurrence of some words from 1935 onwards gives way to interpreting Italian style itself as the artefacts used to negotiate ideological instabilities.

The hammering repetition of keywords as elegance, personality, classicism and modernity was an attempt to instil in the Italian male population an idea of "inner-nationality" supported by objects and words. The re-semanticization of these words, in light of shifts in dominant ideology and society, allowed the language of Italian style to perform a different identity every time. Benedict Anderson inferred that playing on the familiarity of some concepts has the power to imagine a nation: in *Arbiter*, the codification of a national sartorial identity lied not in the rejection of some concepts and their manifest substitution, but in the reshuffling of the values they bore.

Even though there were changes in frequency, *Arbiter* never stopped being published between 1935 and 1983. In the 1950s, it was actively involved in the organisation and promotion of the first public event ever dedicated only to Italian men's fashion, which saw the collaboration of all the major actors part of the system: the festival of Italian menswear, first held in San Remo in September 1952. 1935 and 1952 served as the chronological boundaries defining the timeframe of the research, which focused on *Arbiter* as both object

14. Danilo Craveia, *La battaglia per il Marchio* (unpublished paper, Archivio Casa Zegna).

15. *Dalla Lana al Tessuto*, Istituto Nazionale Luce in collaboration with Lanificio Zegna e Figli (Archivio Casa Zegna, 1933).

16. Letter by Gino Magnani to Ermenegildo Zegna, 22nd July 1939, AEZ F 612 f 2822.

17. *Arbiter*, Issue 8, February 1936, 30–31.

18. *Arbiter*, Issue 6.7, December 1935, 312–313.

19. *Arbiter*, Issue 15, October 1936, 372.

of enquiry and main archive, to inform an understanding of the intricate relationship between masculinity, fashion and modernity during critical years for Italian society.

Why Arbiter? Reflecting on the research process

The decision to focus on *Arbiter* to study the Italian menswear fashion system came after the acknowledgment of two main absences: a gap in the historiography concerning men's fashion of the period, and the absence of fashion within the sociological and cultural investigations on masculinity in the Italian context. A personal interest in men's fashion led me to look for the material traces to reconstruct the history of men's fashion in Italy, given the little space it occupies in the literature concerning Italian fashion. Although recognising the role of menswear within the Italian landscape, virtually all the titles dealing with Italian fashion focus on womenswear as their main area of investigation. However, as economists Andrea Balestri ad Marco Ricchetti have noted, menswear and womenswear were two well defined and separated industries since the very beginning of twentieth century, described as:

> ... two parallel universes where products, patterns, manufacturing techniques, seasons, and innovations moved forward incrementally, one sector leapfrogging the other, at times colliding, but never merging.[20]

The difference of these "universes" is supported by the fact that two distinct terms are used to identify wool production for women and men, respectively *laneria* and *drapperia*.

In trying to map out the material culture of Italian men's fashion, the very scarcity of objects — or rather, the difficulty in finding them, given that Italy is lacking a national institution dedicated to the recollection and preservation of national fashion — directed me to turn to magazines as platform for identity-building: of a gender group, of a nation, and ultimately of fashion as a system of communication. Following critic Maria Luisa Frisa on the importance of looking at magazines when studying social issues, I became fascinated with how the arrangement of materials on the page often mirrors the way in which society perceives and communicates itself, not only to the contemporaries but also to future generations.[21] My focus on *Arbiter* was the result of a shift from a material approach, to the evaluation of a narrative, as constructed by magazines.[22] Through *Arbiter*, I looked at the discourses fabricated around these "missing objects," reconstructing them through an assemblage of words, images and memories, which I considered as traces that helped to recreate a complex scenario.

Within the realm of fashion history, female fashion magazines from the first half of twentieth century have been the basis for some of the most compelling analysis of the ways in which the Italian fashion system articulated and contributed to the making of the nation as a brand. The "cultural capital" attached to the idea of Italian style can be dated back at least to the 1920s, as stated by Eugenia Paulicelli in her book *Fashion under Fascism*.[23] As she rightly observed, since then Italian style has received validation within the realm of popular culture: movies, newsreel, and magazines were the spaces in which the contradictory relationship to modernity — especially for women — was negotiated. Fashion has been used as a lens to inform the understanding of fascist modernity by Mario Lupano and Alessandra Vaccari. In their book *Una Giornata Moderna (Fashion at the Time of Fascism).* Drawing from Roger Griffin's explanation of Fascism as "variant of modernity," Lupano and Vaccari introduced the expression "original modern," a new definition that holds together the more traditional aspects of fascist ideology with the inevitable drive towards advancement necessary to be competitive at an international level.[24]

20. Andrea Balestri, Marco Ricchetti, "Manufacturing Men's Wear," In Giannino Malossi, *Material Man* (Bergamo: Bolis, 2000), 52.

21. Maria Luisa Frisa, *Lei e Le Altre* (Venezia: Marsilio, 2011), 17.

22. Christopher Breward, *Fashion*, (Oxford: Berg), 115.

23. Eugenia Paulicelli, *Fashion Under Fascism* (Oxford: Berg, 2004).

24. Lupano and Vaccari, *Una Giornata Moderna*, 9.

Italian modernity is not a clear-cut artefact, especially in its articulation after World War II. Historian Nicola White, in her book *Reconstructing Italian Fashion*, considered exchanges between America and Italy in terms of goods but also in terms of narratives.[25] Drawing from these ideas, Christopher Breward pointed out how the Italian post-war idea of modernity aligned with the American one, more openly linked to consumerism, and the reception by the USA of Italian goods as synonymous with elegance and high quality.[26] The role of female fashion publications after 1945 was analysed by semiologist Gabriele Monti in his essay *Attraverso uno specchio di Carta*. Monti wrote about the role of fashion in the construction of Italianicity in women's fashion magazines after the end of World War II, both in relation to the reconstruction of the industry that took place in those years and the foreign voices influencing the systematisation of the discourse around Italian fashion.[27] Fashion magazines are devices in the hands of the historian in order to grasp a wider international project, which was completed by the American press — in publications such as *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar* — to "sell" Italy as the upcoming fashion hub, and find innovation in manufacturing techniques and fresh ideas in terms of creativity and communication.

The other absence concerns fashion itself within the field of sociological research regarding masculinity in Italy. It is worth noting that the historiography dealing with twentieth century Italian masculinity is still an "invisible partiality," quoting Sandro Bellassai and Maria Malatesta in the introduction of the book *Genere e Mascolinità* [Gender and Masculinity].[28] As a relatively recent field investigated by cultural theorists and sociologists, studies of Italian masculinity have included neither fashion, nor the narratives produced by it, amongst the techniques men used to shape their own identity. The existing research on men's gender identity is focused primarily on visual and textual representations to analyse the ways in which masculinity participated in the definition of Italian modernity. Academics such as Ara Marjian, Barbara Spackman and Simonetta Falasca Zamponi have concentrated on the linguistic articulation of fascist ideology, individuating virility as the core term of Italian Fascism itself.[29] Media theorist Liliana Ellena has looked at imagery, the "fantasy," crafted by cinema from the 1930s, to individuate masculinity as public code, turning men into the incarnation of the normative model designed by the regime.[30] Sandro Bellassai, looking at journals, novels and propaganda material, has considered the depiction of the male body as exemplifications of the ideal "new men" of Fascism: the tireless peasant, the strong warrior, the unbeatable soldier; he also described the negative models — the philosopher and the bourgeois — starting to unpack the problematic relationship between tradition and modernity within fascist culture. Bellassai ultimately states how investigations in the area of consumption, both before and after the war, could open up to a more nuanced understanding of Italian masculinity as a complex discursive fabrication.

According to Christopher Breward, fashion magazines have the potential to turn the manufacturing industry into a cultural one,[31] while Djurdja Bartlett, Agnés Rocamora and Shaun Cole argued that "by mapping key changes in fashion and commodity culture, the fashion media have also captured and produced modernity in all its contradiction."[32] So, after acknowledging these absences and gaps in the historiography, I considered looking at the narrative produced by the fashion magazine *Arbiter* as a good way of entering the cultural and historical debate surrounding fashion, considering the different artefacts that enter in the wide and not-yet-regulated definition of fashion's material culture.

25. Nicola White, *Reconstructing Italian Fashion* (Oxford: Berg, 2000).

26. Christopher Breward, "The Return of the Courtier: Men and Menswear," in Sonnet Stanfill, *The Glamour of Italian Fashion. Since 1945* (London: Victoria & Albert Museum, 2014), 180.

27. Gabriele Monti, "Attraverso uno specchio di carta," in Maria Luisa Frisa, Stefano Tonchi, and Anna Mattirolo, *Bellissima* (Milano: Electa, 2014), 34–39.

28. Sandro Bellassai, Maria Malatesta, *Genere e Mascolinità* (Roma: Bulzoni, 2000), 10.

29. Ara H. Merjian, "Fascism, Gender and Culture," *Qui Parle,* Vol. 13, No. 1 (Fall/Winter 2001), 1–12; Barbara Spackman, *Fascist Virilities* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, Simonetta, *Fascist Spectacle*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

30. Liliana Ellena, "Mascolinità e immaginario nazionale nel cinema Italiano degli anni Trenta," in Sandro Bellassai e Maria Malatesta, *Genere e Mascolinità* (Roma: Bulzoni, 2000), 250.

31. Breward, *Fashion*, 115.

32. Djurdja Bartlett, Agnes Rocamora and Shaun Cole, "Introduction," *Fashion Media* (Bloomsbury: London, 2013), 1.

Rhapsody of methodology: *Arbiter* as complex object

Staying in between different actors — editors, manufacturers, designers, tailors, clients — and with the aim to speak and be useful to each of them, *Arbiter* developed as hybrid object. It showcased products from the industries, but it was not a trade magazine; it presented tailoring methods and techniques, but it was not a tailoring manual; it reported on events and also political matters, but it was neither a newspaper nor a mere tool of political propaganda. The negotiation between these different "natures" happened though the graphic arrangement of materials on the page and also with changes in the actual materiality of inserts and spreads. The inserts dedicated to sartorial techniques, for instance, were usually printed on lighter paper, with smaller fonts and recognisable layout.

The very nature of the magazine, as I have confronted it as object and archive, and the peculiarities of the Italian context, led to consider different methodologies that have historically been used to analyse fashion and magazines. These techniques account for a mixture of semiology, psychology and art criticism, positioning representations and images as the first step of the analysis, following the principle stated by Anne Hollander in her book *Seeing Through Clothes*.[33] Most of the models for studying men's fashion magazines focus heavily on the ways meaning is produced through representations, of clothing and gender identity, on the page.[34] However, given the hybrid nature of *Arbiter*, the most fruitful approach was that of design history, a discipline that is itself a rhapsodic assemblage of different methodologies. I therefore studied Arbiter as a complex designed object, also building a theoretical framework that considers it both as a text and an actor involved in the formation and development of a network. The magazine in fact, stemming from the desire of a group of textile manufacturers to promote their products as well as from the political agenda of a regime involved in the creation of a self-sufficient state, showcased a various array of goods — items, but also textiles and raw materials — covering different aspects of consumer culture, from production to consumption. *Arbiter* was not just trying to promote manufacturers or sell products; its agenda was far more ambitious. The use of words like "life" and "style" in the subtitle of the magazine itself made *Arbiter* belonging also to the realm of lifestyle magazines.[35] The literature focusing on "lifestyle magazines" identifies a well-defined kind of publication, flourishing in the 1980s, and dealing with masculinity as "practice of the self."[36] Studies of these publications, of which *Arena* and *GQ* are two examples, are a good bridge between more historical analysis of masculinity, as done, amongst others, by Christopher Breward.[37] The leitmotif is the focus on masculine consumption. Consumption is a good category of enquiry when dealing with fashion, and proved to be key in unpacking many of the strategies put in place by the magazine — and the network behind it — to shape its language; as Tim Edwards noted in his influential book *Men in the Mirror: Men's Fashion, Masculinity and Consumer Society*:

> ... masculinity in men's magazines has very little to do with sexual politics and a lot more to do with markets for the constant reconstruction of masculinity through consumption.[38]

In terms of methodology for the research, thinking of *Arbiter* as object is useful to consider the development of the magazine as "aparallel" but nevertheless linked to the system that first originated it; a sort of translation that is, to quote John Law, "about making equivalent, and about shifting ... about moving terms around, about linking and changing them."[39] The possibility to gather different actors and unite

33. Anne Hollander, *Seeing Through Clothes* (New York: University of California Press, 1978), 454.

34. See for example John Potvin, "Writing the Dandy through Art Criticism: Elegance and Civilisation in Monsieur, 1920–1924," *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body & Culture*, 3 (2015), 242. Paul Jobling, *Man Appeal* (Oxford: Berg, 2005), 2.

35. The subtitles of the magazine vary between 1935 and 1952: "Review of men's life;" "men's elegances;" "men's fashion and clothing;" "men's life and style."

36. Sean Nixon, *Hard Bodies* (London: UCL press, 1996), 204.

37. Christopher Breward, *The Hidden Consumer* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 14.

38. Tim Edwards, *Men in The Mirror* (London: Cassell, 1997), 82.

39. Law, John "Actor Network Theory and Material Semiotics," version of 25th April 2007, at http://www.heterogeneities.net/publications/Law2007ANTandMaterialSemiotics.pdf, downloaded on 27th November, 2016, 5.

them, on the page, under the banner of Italianicity allowed the magazine to articulate of a notion of style bound to the whole nation, contributing to its mythologisation.

The methodology I followed — reconstructing the microhistory of the magazine, using different materials linked directly to the object and also linked to the network that produced it — has been effective in underlining some themes and, above all, considering the meaning of their recurrence in the period between 1935 and 1952. The "battle" fought with most strength by the magazine during these years was surely linked to the national identity object could bear. The analysis carried out has allowed to venture into the folds of the relationship between fashion and national identity. *Arbiter*'s continuous references to the nation signalled an interest in exploiting the communicative potential of fashion to give substance to the very notion of Italianicity. In this realm, fashion came out as one of the main techniques to fabricate the narrative of national identity in its material, visual and discursive construction.

While being a tool for the material reconstruction, thanks to its relevance for the national economy, the discourse constructed by the magazine made clear how fashion became a main ingredient contributing to the construction of Italian style as myth. The fact that *Arbiter* decidedly chose to stick to its main objectives, without rejecting the battles taken up in the very first years, talks about a kind of continuity that has been concealed by the established historiographical trend that uses 1945 as watershed signalling two completely different kinds of societies. Exploiting the performative potential of its language, *Arbiter* complexified the very notion of Italian modernity, above all in relation to national and gender identity: as a "transitory quality of the present,"[40] which relied on the individuation of a changing notion of "national essence," allowing men to constantly feel part of a community, both during the ideological dictatorship of Fascism and the crisis that followed its failure.

Researching *Arbiter* in the Ermenegildo Zegna Historical Archive

This research directed to interesting claims about the origins of the notion of Italian style and on the importance of developing structures and tools to study men's fashion as precise object of enquiry. As noted, the Italian academic community has not granted to male fashion — and fashion magazines — the same deal of attention dedicated to female fashion. This is probably due to the number of titles targeting a female over masculine audience: while more than twenty "female publications" were published in 1935, *Arbiter* was the only magazine dealing with men's fashion and style — not just clothing — at least until 1946. Another reason may be access: as of now, it is very hard to find a complete collection of all the issues published between 1935 and 1952.

This research would hardly have been possible without the access to the Ermenegildo Zegna Historical Archive, a comprehensive corporate archive that allowed to analyse the magazine in its complete collection and also to understand the premises that led to its publication and to reconstruct the context surrounding it, thanks to primary sources such as pattern books, oral history transcripts and advertising campaigns. Above all, I was able to fill the gaps and answer the questions the very material asked by reading private correspondence between the editors and Ermenegildo Zegna, which I could consult in the space of the Ermenegildo Zegna Historical Archive.

Carrying out research in the archive of a fashion brand that is still active today called for some preliminary reflection on what is a fashion archive and how to "cross" it. The instruments of the historian had to be adapted to the object of study and, above all, to the space where this object — or, better, these objects — were kept, and how.

There is no set regulation linked to corporate archives dedicated to fashion. The organization of these kind of "private" archives is completely managed by brands themselves, and is usually structured around dynamics that have to do with many factors, the relationship to heritage and, above all, the contemporary utility of the archive being some of the most important ones.

40. Ulrich Lehmann, *Tigersprung* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000), 21.

If brands are still active in the production of collections, archives serve as space where designers can recover information about the historical background of the brand, and can chose to incorporate this heritage in their own work. This leads to structures that are often shaped around the necessity of designer and stylist, which not always follow strict historical timelines or pre-Much research is now being developed in order to reflect on these issues; in most cases, researchers are using their own hybrid position, as both external researchers and "functionaries" involved in the shaping of fashion archives, to inform a theoretical analysis on the state of fashion archives on one side, and on the actual composition of the archives they work for on the other.

The Ermenegildo Zegna Historical Archive comes from the personal holdings of Ermenegildo Zegna himself. It is hold in Trivero, a small town near Biella, in the north-east of Italy, not far both from Milan and Turin, and more precisely in the old house of the founder of the brand. Ermenegildo Zegna's sons and grandsons have decided to reorganize both his personal materials and those linked to the history of the factory in order to preserve the "material memories" of the family business, but also to provide a substantial support to the researches of textile and fashion designers, and to other professionals dealing with communication and design, for instance marketing operators and architects developing stores and corners for retail. This is understandable only if we consider the way the brand has presented and still presents itself: the strategy of the brand, in more than one sector, has always been based on the safeguard and exploitation of its own heritage, which framed the narrative — linked to the familiar dimension of management, to traditional craftsmanship and international ambition — that is still at the core of Zegna's storytelling.

The way the brand deals with its own history and heritage mirrors in the organization of the archive: a great respect towards the way Ermenegildo Zegna used to catalogue what was being bought, sold and made at any time by the factory, and his personal correspondence, which is preserved in the same order and with the same system he had developed; but also a — positive, in my opinion — freedom in the way materials are managed and can travel within the different offices divided between Trivero and Milan. The archive holds many samples of the textiles produced by Zegna since the beginning of twentieth century; this is inextricably linked to the fact that the textile factory is placed in the same building, easing the process of actively "using" the primary material held in the archive.

My own experience was quite different: first, because I was not internal to the brand; and secondly, because the aim of my research was not to reconstruct the history of the Ermenegildo Zegna, but to use the material held there in order to reflect on historical issues linked to politics, the economy and the social scenario of Italy in the period between 1935 and 1952. These reasons meant that I would cross the archive in a way that was inevitably different from the way a designer would have done. The set of questions I was asking the material had to do with the role historical objects linked to fashion had in the construction of a national masculine identity, reconstructing the microhistory of *Arbiter*, using it both as "designed object" at the centre of my analysis and as main archive of information that I could test with the other materials I could find within the Zegna Archive. In order to get to a more multifaceted view of the whole context, I managed to craft my own personal archive, built as rhapsody of different materials — also collected from outside the Zegna Archive, such as newspaper articles, state decrees and newsreels — that could possibly add more nuances to the discourses crafted by *Arbiter* itself, allowing to open up a reflection on the corporate archive and its role within historical researches.

Conclusion

The decision to focus on one magazine, namely *Arbiter*, might be considered too narrow or partial to back up a study encompassing general themes as fashion, national and gender identity. However, the immersion in a corporate archive and the access to different materials, even though not directly linked to the magazine but more to the context of which it was part of, allowed to reconstruct the story behind *Arbiter*, seeing it as a communal platform where many actors performed their agency, and to better understand the reasons behind the development of such a shared project.

During the process of researching, one of the main recurring questions was what definition of fashion research as this can inform, above all in relation to the spaces in which information are archived. Looking at a magazine as designed object has opened up the enquiry to other design projects: of a productive system, of a national style and ultimately, of men in their gender and national identity. The density and richness of the Ermenegildo Zegna Archive has proven to be key in shaping a methodology of enquiry that started from a traditionally historical framework that was continually to be tested and updated according to the way the archive itself was organised. This added a layer of complexity to the way we look at magazines not only as repositories of images and texts, but above all as places of negotiation, whose agency unfolds primarily in the mapping out of networks, fostering their conversations, in order to drive development in different fields — be it productive, political or ideological.

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