CULTURAL PRODUCTION OF «REAL» FASHION
THE RHETORIC OF «AUTHENTICITY» IN CONTEMPORARY «SLOW» FASHION MAGAZINES

DARIA MIKERINA
Charles University in Prague, Faculty of Humanities

Abstract
The key feature in «fashion» always have been rapid changes of styles. It was perceived as a manifestation of modernity characterised by constant forward movement, artifice, transitoriness, and idealised images. But in recent years fashion in this understanding is becoming no longer «fashionable». The paper discusses the new practices of representation of fashion as «real», «long-lasting», and «authentic». The emerging new paradigm, which could be termed post-prêt-à-porter, is characterised by a rejection of trends, a focus on the «relevant» sides of garments and an alteration of the fast fashion cycle. The newcomer biannual fashion magazines, like analysed in this paper Fantastic Man and The Gentlewoman, mediate new practices of transformation «fashion» back to «clothing». The idea is that people are tired of «fake» fashion and are looking for «real» fashion. What does it mean, «the real fashion»? To attempt to answer, this paper rereads Roland Barthes’ classic text on representation of fashion.

Keywords: Roland Barthes, representation, real fashion, authenticity, slow fashion magazines
«– It’s expensive. Is it worth it?
– I hope the clothes are worth it. They’re well made and the fabrics are beautiful. So I believe they will last, as an investment. They’re not something just to be thrown away.»

Phoebe Philo designs the clothes women actually want to wear, The Gentlewoman № 1, 2010

In the epigraph I have an extract from the article that appeared in the first issue of biannual fashion magazine The Gentlewoman in 2010. Few words I want to highlight here: we are going to talk about the clothes that first of all last, and second, women actually want.

This paper presents my research in progress that investigates an emerging version of fashion culture which is characterised by the representation of fashion as «real», «long-lasting», «slow», «substantial», and «authentic». It should be underlined straightaway that I am not analysing representations of developing today alternative sustainable fashion design. Instead I am focusing merely on new practices of representation of seasonal ready-to-wear collections as «long-lasting». (I focus on changes of representations of clothes, not the clothes themselves).

As we know, it is possible to produce a garment that will last physically for 10 years. The question is how to «culturally produce» a garment that we will want to keep. How can representations increase the value and influence the lifespan of garments?

Important and interesting shifts in representation of fashion are happening. The key feature in «fashion” always have been rapid changes of styles. But in recent years fashion in this understanding is becoming no longer «fashionable». Many claim we live in the «era of stuff» (Flaccavento, 2017). As Business of Fashion and McKinsey&Company’s report The State of Fashion 2017 suggests, consumers do not need more «stuff», but demand something valuable and emotional. «People want experiences, they want to feel transformed — not to continue to collect more clutter or more things» (Hoang, 2016). Consumers shift away from purchasing products and move towards spending their money on mind and body-enhancing experiences. «The fashion industry can make that connection by extending its repertoire and value touch points, and by basing its proposition on making a person, feel good beyond simply making a person look good» (The State of Fashion, 2017, p. 75).
This market trend correlates with the changing nature of fashion media. Large-scale commercial print is in the failing state (Lewis, 2016, p. 6). Sales of traditional monthly fashion magazines are in decline. *Vogue*’s best newsstand issue in 2016 sold 238,000 copies, versus 571,000 in 2012, according to the *Alliance for Audited Media* (Fernandez 2017). At the same time «the appetite of print consumers is tending towards unique, beautiful content that deserves to be treasured» (Lewis, 2016, p. 13). There is the growth of «slow» magazine culture, characterised by book-like quality, long-form journalism, good design. In the digital era, print is changing its role and becoming «a medium for contemplation that people collect and return to» (Lewis, 2016, p. 77). Newcomer magazines are biannual, they are produced with the different speed and attitude, and devoted to «valuable» material culture and experiences: travel (*Cereal*), literature (*The Happy Reader*), food (*The Gourmand, Lucky Peach*), fashion (*Gentlewoman, Fantastic Man, Lula, Union, System, Violet, Riposte, Vestoj*), architecture (*PIN-UP*), journalism (*Delayed Gratification*), craft and design (*MacGuffin, Hole&Corner*), visual culture (*Gratuitous Type, Eye, Printed Pages*). All of them promote «sustainable living».

As Jeremy Leslie, founder and creative director of blog, design studio and shop *magCulture*, formulates, «against a background of over-commoditised mainstream publications and free online content, these independents have established new approaches to traditional subjects like sport, fashion and food, as well taking advantage of their position to question the very essence of what a magazine is» (Lewis, 2016, p. 5). Newcomer biannual magazines approach fashion as essential part of our everyday aesthetic.

I choose for analysis of cultural construction of «real» fashion two successful biannual fashion magazines: *The Gentlewoman* and *Fantastic Man*. These magazines are widely acknowledged and well-respected by fashion experts. Launched in 2005 in Amsterdam by Gert Jonkers and Jop van Bennekom, *Fantastic Man* may be seen as a pioneering effort in «slow» fashion publishing. *Fantastic Man* foregrounds personal tastes in lieu of seasonal trends. It is «the original gentleman’s journal, obsessed with personal style, intelligent writing and eloquent photography» (*Fantastic Man MediaKit*, 2017). Today it has a worldwide circulation of 87,628 copies, and *The Business of Fashion* defines it as «one of the most significant new fashion publications of the last decade».

Launched in 2010 by the same publishers and managed by Penny Martin, a respected editor and academic, *The Gentlewoman* has a worldwide circulation of 87,628 copies, and *The Business of Fashion* defines it as «one of the most significant new fashion publications of the last decade».

---

of 98,969 copies, and is referred as «one of the industry's most intellectual and informed women's magazines». As the magazine’s media kit advertises: «Above all, The Gentlewoman provides a unique and timely perspective on the way intelligent women think and dress” (The Gentlewoman MediaKit, 2017). As Martin says about her editorial team’s job: «Our purpose is to offer a timely, quality opinion that stands out from the sea of constant content. When you feel you’re surrounded by non-stop noise, it’s important to be definitive, clear and editorially precise» (Lewis, 2016, p. 30).

Importantly, these publications do not contain any articles on fashion and trends. The Gentlewoman and Fantastic Man present themselves as «people-centred magazines». They mediate fashion by publishing «people profiles», conversations about subjects’ personal wardrobe and clothing habits. Instead of engaging with trends, they present artistic photographic projects, for example analyse the construction of jeans.

As it is explicitly written on The Gentlewoman’s website, it is a place «where real women, real events and real things are enjoyed» (Thegentlewoman.co.uk, 2017). The idea is that people are tired of «fake» fashion and are looking for «real» fashion.

**WHAT DOES IT MEAN, «THE REAL FASHION”? RECALLING BARTHES’ DEFINITION**

In order to understand current changes, it is important to take historical perspectives and to address what we could call «conventional” forms of representations of fashion. The original haute-couture model which was about creation of unique garments and service for a client soon was replaced by prêt-à-porter industry. The dominant theoretical approaches to exploring fashion are based on the perception of fashion as something opposite to «natural». As Walter Benjamin famously emphasises, «Fashion stands in opposition to the organic. It couples the living body to the inorganic world» (Benjamin, 2002, p. 8). It is a manifestation of modernity characterised by constant forward movement, artifice, transitoriness, and idealised images.

To attempt to answer the question «What is the real garment», this paper rereads Roland Barthes’ classic text on representation of fashion. This year marks a half a century since The Fashion System (1967) was published. It was written in the time of the acceleration of fashion and the emergence of prêt-à-porter, in the
time when practices and rules of cultural production of fashion – transformation of «clothing» to «fashion» – were developed.

Thinking about the arbitrariness of fashion, Barthes was the first theorist who turned to language in order to explain the «unnatural» essence of fashion, bringing structuralist methodology to the study of fashion. He applies Ferdinand de Saussure's semiology, «a science that studies the life of signs within society» (de Saussure, 1965, p. 16). The sign is the correlation between a signifier and a signified; the terms of a signifier (the garment) are discrete and material, the terms of a signified (collective concept) are immaterial. The relation of the signifier and the signified is not motivated, it is not natural, but conventional.

Barthes' methodology is based on approaching fashion as a system. In correspondence to Saussure's distinction of langue and parole, he discerns an institutional reality, dress, and an individual actualisation of it, dressing (Barthes, 2013, p. 8). He emphasises that fashion is always part of dress, fashion garments are collective, they are not being worn but only being proposed («a langue without parole») (Barthes, 2013, p. 73). He defined fashion system as disposed to renewal on the one side, and regularity on the other: «the synchrony of Fashion changes abruptly each year, but during the year it is absolutely stable» (ibid.). As he underlines, to unable fashion its arbitrary constant yearly changes «a simulacrum of the real garment” must be created.

Barthes' understanding of «the real garment» is worth of our special attention. In the essay History and Sociology of Clothing he explains that «real» clothing is burdened with practical considerations, «the triangle of motivations» (protection against harsh weather, hiding nudity out of modesty and ornamentation to attract attention). According to him, «what should really interest the researcher (...) is not the passage from protection to ornamentation (an illusory shift), but the tendency of every bodily covering to insert itself into an organised, formal and normative system that is recognised by society» (Barthes, 2013, p. 6). From that perspective, the utility of garments is pushed into the background, and its symbolic function is determinative.

At the centre of prêt-à-porter fashion is the demand for newness, which is expressed in the «endless fashion circle” of attraction, consumption, and rejection. «If clothing’s producers and consumers had the same consciousness, clothing would be bought (and produced) only at the very slow rate of its dilapidation. (...) In order to blunt the buyer’s calculating consciousness, a veil must be drawn around the object» (Barthes, 1983, p. xi). As Barthes underlines, this symbolic function of garments is reached in «represented” clothing, «which no longer
serves to protect, to cover or to adorn, but at most to signify protection, modesty, or adornment» (Barthes, 2013, p. 73).

In fact, we never have access to «the real garment», which has a technological structure. Barthes’ *Fashion System* “approaches the problem of knowing if there really is an object that we call fashion clothing» (Barthes, 2013, p. 93). According to him fashion clothing is a convention, cultural construction that is built up by «a narrow instance of a fashion group» without any natural meanings attributed to it.

Barthes argues that in the system of fashion, the sign is relatively arbitrary, it is elaborated each year, but not by users, but by the «fashion group» (editors of the fashion magazines) (Barthes, 1983, p. 215).

**“WITHOUT DISCOURSE THERE IS NO FASHION”**

Barthes maintained the idea that speech constitutes the reality as «inevitable relay» of any signification (and therefore semiology is a part of linguistics, not the other way around, as it was formulated by Saussure). «In a society like ours, where myths and rite have assumed the form of a reason, i.e. ultimately of a discourse, human language is not only the model of meaning but its very foundation» (Barthes, 1983, p. xi).

Barthes builds his methodology on the hypothesis that clothing that we wear in our everyday life is secondary to clothing represented in the discourse, in the magazines. «Without discourse there is no total Fashion, no essential Fashion» (Barthes, 1983, p. xi).

He underlines that fashion disseminates throughout society as the result of the activity of «translation» from the technological structure of real garment to the iconic and verbal structures (Barthes, 2013, p. x). We could say that this «translation» always changes, «creatively enriches», the «real garment». We always have to deal with mediated – represented, interpreted, «enriched» – garment. Therefore in magazines we see two different garments: *image-clothing* and *written clothing*.

Of course, in between Barthes’ work and our time, dramatic changes have occurred in the system of fashion. Today, we see again the emergence of a new era in fashion, now as a result of the need to slow down. According to fashion professionals, *prêt-à-porter* is on the verge of a crisis, fashion has become «too big, and too fast» (Cronberg, 2016). We see on the one side the continued spread of fast fashion, but on another the growing tendency to produce long-lasting sus-
tainable fashion and the promotion of ethical fashion consumption. New fashion discourses are developing. Therefore, Barthes’s concept that the fashion system is reproduced every year anew appears out-of-date. Slow approaches define fashion as «actual” objects, and emphasise personal relationship with garments. The ethical dimension means understanding fashion as a responsible choice, in contrast to his understanding fashion as norms and regulations. Then we can presume that signs in contemporary fashion system are to a higher degree motivated.

Barthes’ The Fashion System brings up a concern about the tension between material and symbolic values of the fashion garments; and about the tension between collective and individual levels of fashion. He calls his research «a book of method». Today it is a historical monument, a dated polemic, focused on the methodological question» (Steele, 2005, p. 128). As fashion historian Nicole Pellegrin notes, Barthes’s work on fashion, «often referred to, but very little read for themselves (...) still calls for a radically novel approach to the phenomena of fashion» (Steele, 2005, p. 127).

UNPACKING THE NEW RHETORIC OF “AUTHENTICITY” IN NEWCOMER FASHION MAGAZINES

Barthes’ Fashion System seems an important text for analysis of recent practices of cultural production of «real» fashion. This paper uses it not as a methodological tool, but for inspiration and thought provocation.

The emerging new paradigm in fashion, which could be termed post-prêt-à-porter, is characterised by a rejection of trends, a focus on the «relevant» sides of garments and an alteration of the fast fashion cycle. The newcomer biannual magazines, like analysed here Fantastic Man and The Gentlewoman, mediate new practices of transformation «fashion” back to «clothing».

In the «era of stuff», when we are bombarded by products and fashions, that kind of «authenticity» is becoming the new value in fashion (an ethical ideal, but also a business imperative). But of course, «authenticity» is a relevant, but tricky term here. There is a necessity to be careful in usage, and to put it in inverted commas. «Authenticity» is hard to define, it is something that seems somehow real. It does not have the truth values, and it is not a quality. We just believe that something is «real» or perceive that something is «fake». «Authenticity» is constructed through discourses.

How rhetoric of «authenticity» of fashion in «slow» fashion magazines is constructed? This paper tries to present the list of characteristics.
1. Fragmentary «image clothing» with precise «written clothing»

First of all, we need to address a «mismatch» between images and captions in analysed magazines. Photographs are artistic and experimental; they do not «properly» display and «sell» the garment (often they artistically display only a part of it). Descriptions of garments are, on the contrary, highly detailed, technical and precise).

2. Technical description and fashion-specific vocabulary

Descriptions of clothes are very concrete (they refer to the structure of the «real garment»), and they do not interpret the garment. Editors mostly do not use metaphorical language. They prefer very technical description with fashion-specific vocabulary, french terms and adjectival hyphenation:

About to be worn: white cotton bouclé coat, red pleated cotton-mix trousers and black suede shoes with mirrored heel all by Proenza Schouler. Khaki poplin sleeveless shirt with black bows and orange ruffled poplin skirt with pink bows both by MSGM (The Gentlewoman, № 13, p. 148).

A MARNI moment: black leather coat, brown stretch-cotton turtleneck with open back, dusty pink calfskin top, red cotton double skirt, yellow leather bag with gold-and-black handles, black-and-yellow leather shoes with white heel, and gold-and-black metal earrings (The Gentlewoman, № 13, p. 149).

3. Black-and-white photographs with sophisticated colours description

The images are often black-and-white but the colours of garments are described in a very specific and sophisticated manner, for example as eggshell, deep indigo, ecru, baby pink, acid-yellow, cement-grey, heather-grey, sky-blue, powder-pink, burgundy-and-cream, baby-blue-and-white, mint-green, powder pink, etc.

4. Serious tone

In analysed «slow» fashion magazines the tone is serious, and descriptions are essential. The utility of garments and technical characteristics of the garments are brought in the foreground.
A two-piece suit doesn’t have to be stuffy, as demonstrated by Hopper here, with a casual blue-grey wool-and-silk number by Dior Homme worn with a light-grey cotton sweatshirt by LEVI’S and a black mottled-leather belt with gold buckle by Paul Smith. Navy and beige cap with print by Ebbets Field Flannels for TSPR (Fantastic Man, № 23).

Thus, a belief in «relevant» garment qualities is mediated. Clothing «represented» in these magazines serves to signify «authenticity» (fashion is not represented as a «simulacrum» here).

5. Similar men’s and women’s attitude to fashion

The Gentlewoman and Fantastic Man mediate quite similar men’s and women’s attitude to clothes (alternatively to conventional distinction that women follow new styles to please and attract, while men have a sense of tradition). The Gentlewoman and Fantastic Man use similar editorial standards.

6. «Written garments» in «personality profiles»

The «authenticity» of clothing is mediated by placing «written garments» in «personality profiles». The magazines highlight clothing that «somebody wears»: with 10 years’ skateboarding experience, Andrea is a kick-turn whizz, as she proves here, wearing a floor-length silk-and-linen slip dress with a draped neckline and rhinestone straps by Saint Laurent By Heidi Slimane. The purple wool zip-up jumper is vintage, from Cenci (The Gentlewoman, № 13, p. 202).

7. «Written clothing” in the narrative

A caption to the subject’s photo consists of different interesting facts about the person, and the last utterance is always «written clothing».

While filming short «The Men of Santa Muerte», Hopper broke his hand on set, but the dedicated actor refused to go to hospital and hold up production. He wears this grey wool two-piece by Richard James so confidently. Offering a lively twist is this pink cotton polo shirt by Polo Ralph Lauren (Fantastic Man, № 23).
8. Presentation of clothes in everyday situation

The idea that fashion shapes our daily experiences is mediated by presenting clothes in everyday simple situations. For instance, in the last issue of *The Gentlewoman* there is a story «24/7» about wearing double denim and using the cash-point 24/7.

9. Presentation of «own clothes”

A wardrobe-based approach to clothing is expressed in subjects not wearing only clothes from the latest collections but also «their own clothes» (not necessarily branded) too.

Photographed overlooking The Mall from the roof of the ICA, Gregor wears a cotton shirt and textured-wood suit by Cos, a silk twill tie by Hermés and his own leather brogues by Church’s (*Fantastic Man*, № 23).

Photographed in Bruton, Somerset, Manuela is wearing her own checked coat by *Vivienne Westwood Gold Label* and a knitted red wool top and matching skirt by *Malene Birger* (*The Gentlewoman*, № 13, p. 187).

**REPRESENTATION OF «FASHION» IN CODES OF DESIGN**

Through detailed technical descriptions, «slow» fashion magazines mediate fashion in codes of design, they emphasise «beauty» in terms of function and attitude. Fashion is represented as not some kind of «fiction» or frivolous matter here.

Interestingly design theorist and director of the Design Museum, Deyan Sudjic defines the term «authentic» precisely using example from fashion: «Every time I pull the zip with the six-inch-long green braided cord, designed to be used in conditions that would be unendurably cold without gloves, I have a sense of the thoughtfulness that went into every detail. The parka seems like a garment beyond fashion, yet it is a category that has clearly taken a conspicuous place in the language of fashion» (Sudjic, 2015, p. 2).

«A sense of thoughtfulness» is the important characteristic of new forms of representation of contemporary fashion. The message is: the clothes are not about «superficial trends», they are «something actual».
But, as we know very well from Barthes, there is no «real» clothes, no matter how much we would want them today. Sudjic says about his favourite second-hand parka, «I wear it because it is somehow real, but the authenticity that attracted me in the first place could have been lovingly and inventively faked». He defines «authenticity» as «irresistible combination of authority and sincerity» (Sudjic, 2015, p. 3). For Sudjic it is a nature of design. When fashion is represented in codes of design, the representation of «authenticity» is implied.

MODE OF GRAPHIC DESIGN

Graphic design is the next mode we should analyse here. Of course, «slow» fashion magazines are very graphic design driven magazines. In analysed magazines, graphic design is as important as text. Detailed image captions discussed above shouldn’t be taken that «literally», because they are at the same time very essential design elements, the «filler». One of the reason why they are that long and detailed, because it simply looks good on the page, it is a graphic designer’s decision. Here we have another layer in the construction of «tricky authenticity» of fashion in contemporary «slow» fashion magazines.

As graphic design theorists interestingly formulate, every piece of graphic design is a forgery: «No one loves authenticity like a graphic designer. And no one is quite as good at simulating it» (Blauvert, 2007, p. 167).

According to Sugjic, the «authenticity» could be constructed when we approach the subject with «sincerity»: « Authenticity for a designer is a quality that comes from attempting to understand how design communicates a sense of sincerity, and then faking it» (Sudjic, 2015, pp. 10–11). In modern world «authenticity» inevitably coexists hand in hand with «lovely fakes», and fashion probably would be the best example here.

CHANGES IN REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN

Changes in representation of fashion are not only concerned with the representation of clothes, but also with the representation of «woman of fashion». With focus on the materiality of garments, tactility and pleasures that garments provide, rather than their look, in analysed magazines representations are shifting from «stereotyped images» structured around the gaze, toward more emotional and «authentic» portraits.
Having older women as cover characters The Gentlewoman visibly goes against conventions of representation of woman of fashion (white, thin, tall and young). Issue № 6 of The Gentlewoman with Angela Lansbury on the cover is cited a lot for featuring an 86-year-old woman, as well as issue № 3 with a singer Adele Adkins who does not fit samples. As Martin explains: «We featured Adele and Angela because they're brilliant at what they do and they’re really lovely women, not because of their size or age. But it's really nice to think that, rather than exploiting them to stage some phoney debate, those covers turned them into contemporary fashion icons» (Lewis, 2016, p. 48).

In journalist’s texts these women are presented as women of their «own style”, they wear clothes that they do «want to wear». They are fashion-aware, but they are not fashion-led. To have own style, to have own wardrobe means to be «authentic». Yet to be stylised (by the editorial team of The Gentlewoman) means to be «fake» (even if «lovingly and inventively»).

The very involvement of a stylist and editorial team, of course, militates against the «authenticity». One of the further tasks for my research would be to try to analyse devices and approaches newcomer magazines use to represent a woman in a fashion magazine, but not empty her specificity. How many manipulations could be made to still represent a woman as «authentic»? Are these manipulations «sincere»? As philosopher Somogy Varga underlines, the moral ideal of sincerity is an important step towards the contemporary shape of authenticity (Varga, 2012, p. 28).

REFERENCES


