

# MEATY MAGS AND FLEESHY FILMS

## OBSERVING THE MORPHING BODY OF TEXT IN FASHION VISUAL CULTURE

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## Abstract

This paper addresses the topic of transformation identifying written text as a living body, ultimately suggesting that the corporeal qualities of textual matter function as an interpretative tool for unpacking new and unexpected fashion imagery. Through the observation of three fashion films dating between 2005 and 2020, as well as relying on a firm theoretical framework based on the analysis of Roland Barthes' seminal volume *The Pleasure of Text* (1973), the research discusses the role of written discourse in contemporary fashion communication, highlighting its performative and erotic traits and how these inherent properties interreact within the field of fashion visual culture. Fashion moving image is therefore seen as the context in which—and with which—the body of text seductively moves, mutates, and merges to unveil unprecedented visual scapes.

**Keywords:** Fashion Visual Culture, Text, Body, Visual Studies, Fashion Film

## Introduction

The notion of referring to a piece of written material as a body of text is familiar to all, as it is a common expression largely used to indicate the central parts of a publication, a book or other compositions of words and phrases. Therefore, text and the ever-changing crossbreeding of its cells—which are in fact the letters of the alphabet—are frequently, and often unknowingly, charged of bodily qualities and a corporeal dimension (Bacon, 1620). Starting from this assumption, the research unpacks the definition of text offered by Roland Barthes in the volume *The Pleasure of Text* (1973) and applies this theoretical framework to the realm of fashion visual culture, specifically through the study of fashion film. By observing both written material and moving image across the same complex of notions, the paper not only identifies a shared array of anatomical features, but also highlights mutual tensions and performative qualities, such as the drive towards desire, pleasure, and subversion (Barthes, 1973).

If on one hand text could thence be analysed as a living and breathing system, on the other, fashion almost inherently implies the idea

of a body, featured for instance in its materiality (Emberley, 2007), representation (Smelik, 2006), projection (Eco, 1985) or absence (Jonkers, 2019). Even more so, fashion films necessarily entail the presence of a body of some sort and are considered as the ideal visual space in which the body can move freely, interact, and ultimately express its physicality through fashion (Amaducci & Manca, 2021). By considering both the corporeal properties of text and those implied by fashion films, the paper analyses three case studies illustrating different modalities in which the physical encounter between the body of text and that of moving image activate original cultural interpretations and, in doing so, inform fashion visual culture with unexpected points of view.

## The Anatomy of Text

One of the first investigations that trace a clear and profound link between the intricate apparatus of text and that of fashion visual culture is the work of renowned semiologist Roland Barthes, whose seminal volume *The Fashion System* (1967) questions the relationships between written

material and fashion imagery (Barthes, 1953), applying a theoretical approach on language to fields of study such as fashion communication and promotion.

In his 1973 volume *The Pleasure of the Text*, Barthes pushes the research further, disclosing the bodily traits of text (pp. 11-12) and ultimately defining written discourse as a complex system characterized by a fluid, protean and cumulative nature. In the study, the semiologist in fact differentiates the “text of pleasure” from “the text of bliss” (p. 14), attributing different abilities and levels of access to each. The first, in fact, is described as an extension of the dominant culture and therefore is experienced by “a comfortable practice of reading” (p.14), while the second is characterised by its power to jeopardize systems and its faculty to “impose a state of loss, [...] discomfort and unsettlement to the reader’s historical, cultural, and psychological assumptions” (p.14), ultimately generating upheaval through the practice of reading.

According to Barthes, the goal of written text is therefore to transport the reader into the realm of pleasure and bliss, and to do so it must trigger the status quo by adopting the restlessness of language (p. 6). Thus, for Barthes, it is precisely the heterogeneous escamotages of language—be them narrative, lexical, or stylistic—that confer to the body of written text a more tangible, visible, and performing set of properties. In particular, the semiologist defines the tension that binds the body of the reader to that of written material as a carnal bliss, an orgasmic desire consumed through the fetishist observation of its various anatomical parts. According to the semiologist: “The text is a fetish object, and this fetish desires me. The text chooses me, by a whole disposition of invisible screens, selective baffles: vocabulary, references, readability, etc.; and, lost in the midst of a text (not behind it, like a *deus ex machina*) there is always the other, the author” (p. 27). The powerful bond between written discourse and the corporality of the reader is therefore described as varied and inconsistent. By establishing a performative and fragmentary relation expressed through appropriations, cross-references, narrative structures, lexical choices, homages, and virtuosity; the text feeds the reader’s desire following a syncopated, broken and, indeed, fragmentary rhythm. “Is it not the most erotic portion of a body where the garment gapes? In perversion (which is the realm of textual pleasure) it’s the intermittent [...] which is erotic [...] the staging of an appearance and disappearance”

(pp. 9-10), Barthes concludes. In this light, the practice of reading emulates that of edging, through which the reader is kept constantly on its toes due to the ever-changing and sudden nature of written text.

In the seminal book *Cartamodello: Antologia di scrittori e scritture sulla moda* (2000), the Italian writers Vittoria Caterina Caratozzolo and Paola Colaiacomo investigate fashion culture through written extracts and quotes of key theorists, also documenting a relationship of tension and inconstancy in the practice of reading. In the introduction of the volume, Colaiacomo describes the act of reading as “a schooling in the discipline of ellipsis. A training to bear the suspension of meaning, between one word and another, between one verse and another, between one chapter and another” (Colaiacomo, 2000, p. 14). Reading implies the desire to strive for completeness, which is however out of reach due to the polymorph and infinitely dense nature of the text. What the reader encounters is therefore a composite landscape (Deleuze, 1995), a panorama, a constellation of imaginaries that satisfy or not the search for pleasure in a fetishist and utterly physical way. Since written material—with its own set of references, appropriations, styles—is by nature lumpy and uneven, then also the practice of reading becomes a discipline to an unstable, perhaps even unattainable, kind of pleasure.

### **Text and the Fashioned Body**

As previously introduced, the presence of a body is almost inherent in the discipline of fashion. The material, creative, and cultural practices that regulate the fashion system are in a way programmed exactly for this purpose: to cover, reveal, and reimagine human features. When not worn, clothes are in fact a document of the absence of a body, when inhabited, however, they become the visual manifestation of its presence, a corporeal extension of that same body which has historically been defined as in or out of fashion (Emberley, 2007) by seasonal collections, campaigns, and fashion writing.

Through the concept of the “fashioned body”, scholar Kim Sawchuk affirms that, though fashion, the body becomes “an embodied subjectivity, constituted in the rich weave of social, historical and cultural inscriptions” (Sawchuk, 2007, p. 478). The fashioned body is therefore inherently



Fig. 01

fragmented, composite, and restless, holder of innumerable narratives and interpretations which stimulate a compulsive—and often unattainable—quest to its complete unpacking and comprehension. Thus, both textile and skin seem to share the same fluidity, vagueness, interplay, and intertextuality (Rocamora & Smelik, 2016, p. 257) typical of the body of text enunciated by Barthes. In the seminal article *Fashion and visual culture* (2006), Anneke Smelik extensively investigates the dynamics that regulate fashion media in the age of postmodernism, lunging also into the study of the intertextuality intrinsic to fashion imagery, the fashioned body, and visual pleasure. “Another postmodern feature is intertextuality, which amounts to the idea that a text always refers to other texts. [...] This term does not, of course, simply represent a narrow view of text; images likewise ceaselessly refer to each other” (Smelik, 2006, p. 157) states Smelik, specifying that “a large part of visual pleasure in contemporary culture is based on recognition: the more references you can place, the cleverer you feel as a viewer.” (Smelik, 2006, p. 157). Within the field of study of fashion visual culture, also researcher Paul Jobling states that “the meaning of fashion is a matter of

intertextuality between word and image” (Jobling, 2016, p. 139), ultimately suggesting that fashion images, just like Barthes’ definition of the text, are compound fantasies that feed the consumer into the dimension of an incomplete and fetishist pleasure. Though these lens, within the realm of fashion visual culture, both the fashioned body and written text could be capable to inform each other and, in doing so, create innovative visual imageries inextricably linked to the concept of pleasure and desire.

To establish an ever more profound relation between the body of written text and fashion imagery, we could further argue that fashion film encapsulates at best all the anatomical properties introduced by Barthes. Fuelled by the interplay of different authors and subjectivities—like those that distinguish fashion magazines (Marcadent, 2020)—fashion films are a highly fetishist media, studded by countless references, vocabularies, glossaries, allusions, and grammars. Deeply discussed by fashion researcher Marketa Uhlířová in her article *100 Years of the Fashion Film Frameworks and Histories* (2015), fashion film—a term introduced in the early 2000s—is in fact defined as a “medium [...] adept at recasting consumption as seductive



visual entertainment,” (p. 140). If we intend to read fashion films under Barthes’ lens, it is precisely those agglomerations expressed within the fashioned body present in fashion film that desire us and that unleash in us that same fetishist quest for pleasure distinctive of the text.

### **Case Studies: Sentient, Erotic and Dissident Bodies**

Distinguished by its cross disciplinary nature and its natural receptiveness to any technological and aesthetic stimuli (Amaducci & Manca, 2021, p.80), as well as its intrinsic correlation with the realm of pleasure, contemporary fashion film could be an ideal field of research in which analyse the morphologies of the textual body. By selecting three case studies, dating from 2005 to 2020, in which the presence of the fashioned body as defined by Sawchuk is evident, it becomes clear how the presence of the body of text influences innovative implications of fashion in visual culture.

A significant case study that highlights this phenomenon could be the video submitted by renowned fashion photographer Tim Walker for SHOWStudio’s brief *Moving Fashion* (2005), inspired by his editorial *Timeless* featured in the December 2005 issue of *Vogue Italia*. The film welcomes us with an aerial view of a blown-up version of the November 1st, 1949 issue of *Vogue US*, on the cover of which stands out a photograph by Irving Penn portraying his life partner and model Lisa Fonssagrives wearing a flowing red dress and contrasting black gloves. The pages of the immense magazine are gradually leafed through by a faceless figure until we see the actress and star of the *Vogue Italia* editorial Hannelore Knuts lying among the gigantic *Vogue* spreads, from which she subsequently emerges by detaching herself from the paper support. Both the film and the images published in *Vogue Italia* can be interpreted as a metaphorical transposition of the corporeality of Barthes’ text of bliss, which interacts with the fashioned body—that of the living model, but also that of Fonssagrives—conveying a sense of tactile intimacy. In the film, the protagonist of the printed editorial comes to life and with her also all the articles, captions, and cultural references of the *Vogue* issue, shown here as a massive, out of scale, almost looming entity, but also as a body capable of embracing its contents, the body of the model, and, maybe, the reader’s as well. In this case, the physicality of the text is expressed through

its sentient activity and its highly attractive and magnetic nature. The body of text is therefore here seen as dynamic and performing, capable of interacting with, attracting and enclosing other bodies though the upheavals dictated by its sudden movements. The consequence of this encounter is the establishment of a high charge of tension to desire.

Another pertinent example that highlights instead the more fetishist and erotic aspects of the body of text could be the fashion film directed by English photographer Nick Knight for the audiovisual and performance project *Transformer* launched in 2002 on the digital platform SHOWStudio. In the film *Eat Fashion* (2002), the British model Erin O’Connor stages the act of consuming fashion through savouring a banquet of magazines, a practice that induces the model’s body to visibly transform and morph. At first dressed in a light and transparent little black dress, the model approaches a pile of magazines in a nonchalant and relaxed way, a tower from which she passively begins to tear pages and taste them slowly. As the film continues, we see O’Connor feed more and more voluptuously on these pages, a crescendo conveyed also in the increasing number of garments that cover



Fig. 02

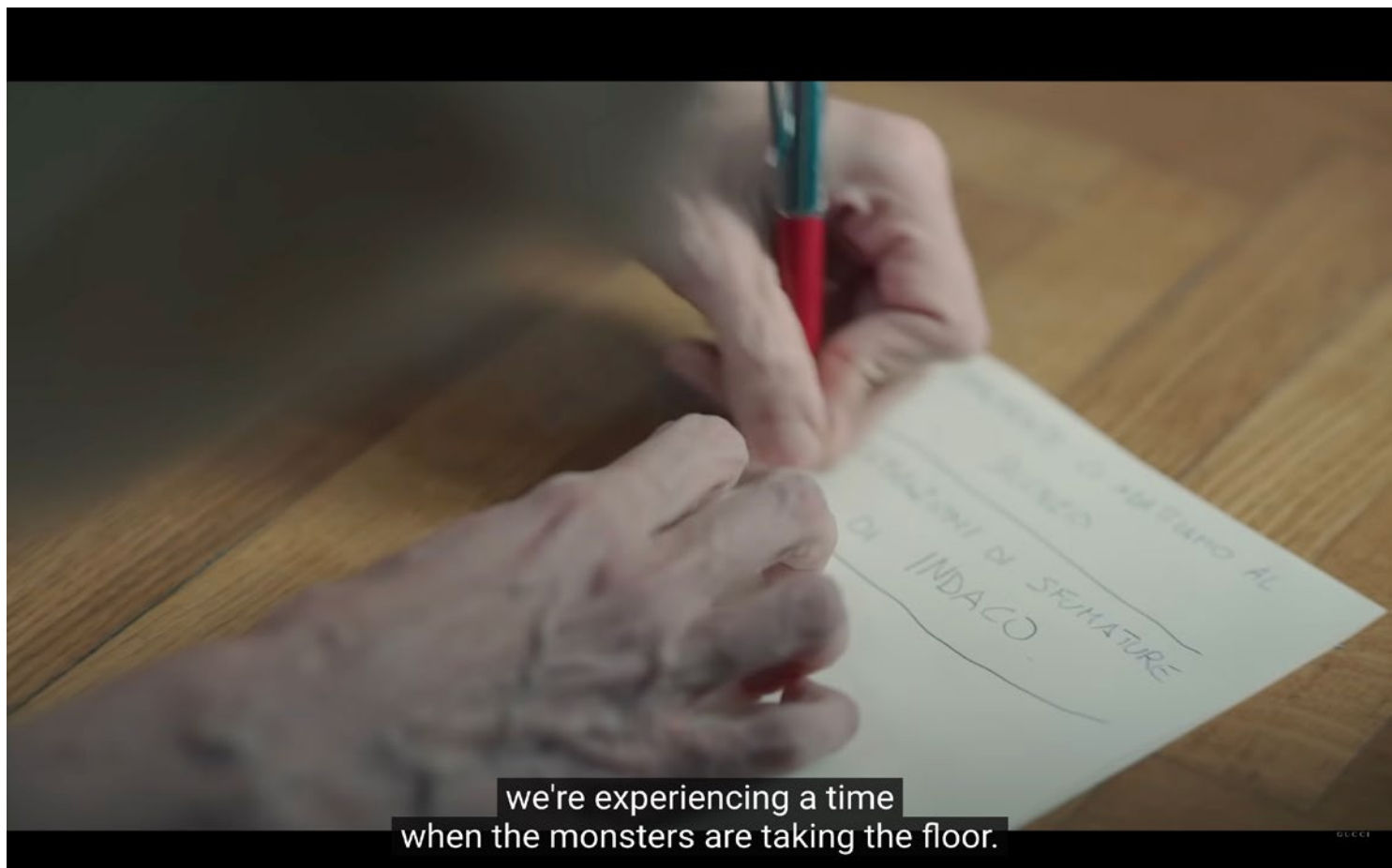


Fig. 03

the performer's body. The greed for magazines is also supported by other gestures, such as the placing of torn pages under the stratified clothes: a padding that deforms O'Connor's body which is progressively submerged and encapsulated by heavy layers of fabrics and printed paper. At the end of the video O'Connor is visibly tired—her figure visibly distorted by binge eating fashion printed media, as if some form of life was born from this encounter and is expanding from the womb of the model. The fashion film in question could be seen as a transposition of the practice of reading, an operation previously described as driven by a fetishist desire for completeness, an orgasmic but only partially satisfying practice. The obsession with the consumption of text and images resonates in the bulimic gestures of the model, who can't help but swallow the huge quantity of references, imaginaries, and narratives that end up occupying her body and stretching it both from the inside and, symptomatically, from the outside. One last example that reveals the morphologies of written text could be the cultural operations that the creative director and designer Alessandro Michele outlined for Gucci since 2015 up until his recent departure from the brand in 2022. Michele's

work is deeply influenced by written material (Socha, 2020) and tries to elevate the inspirational and informative nature of text, well as for its ability to come alive, mutate and morph. This is greatly exemplified in most of the episodes of the mini-series directed by filmmaker Gus Van Sant in 2020 for Gucci titled *Overture Of Something That Never Ended*, studied not only by the presence of Italian performance artist Silvia Calderoni, but also by that of written discourse. In the first episode *Home*, for instance, Calderoni is seen preparing for the day in her Roman house while, on a television screen in the background, Spanish writer and philosopher Paul B. Preciado gives a lecture that touches upon the systemic violence and regulations of the body across the centuries. "This revolution is going to be about love. It's going to be a matter of changing desire, of transforming desires," states Preciado directly addressing Silvia through the screen, a phrase that inspires the performer to take a small piece of paper and write a few poetically charged notes, diametrically opposite in style to the clear and lucid words spoken by Preciado but rooted in the same aspirations of a social revolution. Considering that both Silvia Calderoni and Paul

B. Preciado are militants of this revolution, being an active part in practices of resistance and inhabiting dissident bodies, in this case the written notes are ever more charged of corporeal qualities, becoming not only an extension of the protagonists' flesh, but also a dense clot of a identities, memories and experiences. In the volume *Fashion Film* (2021), when describing the series signed by Van Sant for Gucci, writer Eleonora Manca directly quotes Francesca Alfano Miglietti: for Manca, the series is an example of *cadavre exquis*, “a body as a shock and tangle of messages, languages, [...] a body that changes its appearance to better adapt to the present chaos.” (p.89). In this instance, written discourse moves and shifts in chaos, it a utopia (Foucault, 2014 [1966]), a terrain of multiplication and trespassing (Manca, 2021, p.89) that stretches from Preciado's words to his body, to that of Silvia and finally on the white page, blossoming throughout the movie and constituting a multitude of bodies and identities.

## Conclusion

What emerges from the paper is firstly the intertextuality that defines “the text of bliss”, as described in the literature review of Bathes' seminal volume *The Pleasure of Text* (1973). After analysing the bodily traits of text—which are defined as inconsistent, performative, and restless—the paper then observes how the composite nature of written material extends from the page into the scope of human experience, triggering a quest for pleasure and completeness.

The qualities of text are then compared to those identified in fashion as a system of meaning, especially to the concept of the “fashioned body”, a fragmented physicality which can be elevated through fashion film—being this media also mainly characterised by intertextuality and its tension to visual pleasure. As the case studies analysed demonstrate, written text and the fashioned body presented in fashion films share the same fragmentary, cumulative, and restless matrix and are highly performing bodies of meaning, whose actuations are conveyed by a common tension towards a fetishist pleasure for completeness and subversion.



Fig. 04



Written text and the fashioned body are in fact understood as highly composite and attractive devices, capable of embracing other entities, as in the case of *Moving Fashion*, establishing an erotic and fetishist relationship, as in case of *Eat Fashion*, or becoming the vehicle for morphing new identities as we have seen in *Overture Of Something That Never Ended*. The relationship between text and the fashioned body could therefore be interpreted as an encounter between a plethora of physicalities, an all-encompassing experience that affects fashion visual culture stimulating new and unexpected interpretations. Finally, the research demonstrates that, when in the realm of fashion film, the body of text mutates and merges with its surroundings, triggering the creation of innovative visual and symbolic panoramas.

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## Figure Captions

Fig. 01 *Timeless Walker T.* (2005, December) *Timeless* [Spread], *Vogue Italia*. Model Hannelore Knuts poses with a huge replica of *Vogue US* November 1, 1949. From: CLM Agency - Simon Costin <https://www.clm-agency.com/set-design/simon-costin/vogue-italia-tim-walker-7>

Fig. 02 *Eat Fashion Knight N.* (2002, September 19) *Eat Fashion* [Polaroid], SHOWStudio. Model Erin O'Connor covered in clothes and pieces of paper eats from a metal shopping cart full of fashion magazines. From: SHOWStudio, London, UK. <https://www.showstudio.com/tags/erin-oconnor>

Fig. 3 *Overture Of Something That Never Ended* Van Sant G. (2020), *Episodio 1: At Home | Silvia Calderoni e Paul B. Preciado | Overture Of Something That Never Ended* Brief description [Screengrab]. Performer Silvia Calderoni takes notes on a white piece of paper. From: Gucci Fest/YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zKqbG6TLYnc&t=528s>

Fig. 4 *Overture Of Something That Never Ended* Van Sant G. (2020), *Episodio 1: At Home | Silvia Calderoni e Paul B. Preciado | Overture Of Something That Never Ended* Brief description [Screengrab]. Silvia Calderoni lies on the floor in front of a television, next to a pen and a piece of paper. From: Gucci Fest/YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zKqbG6TLYnc&t=528s>