

OVERCOMING THE CREATIVE CRISIS OF THE FASHION INDUSTRY

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Abstract

The paper uses the advent of generative AI in fashion to critically examine the tenets of contemporary fashion design. As an exemplary case study, the work of Demna Gvasalia's at the helm of Balenciaga is critically scrutinized and discussed as the result of the fashion industry's ever-increasing speed and high demand of products at every price range. Within a hyper-globalized industry, fashion designers are forced to accelerate their design process with low production costs and high profits in mind. Given the systematic denial of fashion design understood as intentional creation by mainstream luxury fashion labels, fashion's creative process is already heavily revolving around self-reference and copying, much like generative AI. The integration of visual literacy and academic referencing competences in fashion design education are proposed as strategies to break the cycle of copying and self-reference in fashion and to expand, deepen and diversify the practice of fashion design.

Keywords: *Fashion Design, Fashion Industry, Artificial Intelligence, Research Competences, Visual Literacy*

Introduction

“The End of Fashion” was the title of a book published in 1999 by Wall Street Journal fashion correspondent Teri Agins (Agins, 1999). In seven essays, Agins described the slow demise of revered Parisian fashion houses, and argues that garments designed with attention to details, complex construction and original silhouettes had been replaced by simpler, more wearable clothes inspired by street wear and pop culture. Agins concluded that the role of the fashion designer had profoundly changed: “Today, a designer’s creativity expresses itself more than ever in the marketing rather than in the actual clothes. Such marketing is complicated, full of nuance and innovation – requiring far more planning than what it takes to

create a fabulous ballgown, as well as millions of dollars in advertising.” (Agins 1999, p. 38-39) From a design historical perspective, Agins’s book was an attempt to articulate how the globalization and economic growth of the fashion industry propelled by multi-national luxury conglomerates was accompanied by the simplification of fashion design and the cutting of production costs for garments made for mass-consumption. Over twenty years after “The End of Fashion” was published, the hyper-globalized fashion industry shows no sign of defeat, and after a brief hiatus during the pandemic, it is still growing. The global fashion industry is valued at \$1.7 trillion as of 2023 and the number of retail sales in the fashion industry is expected to grow to three trillion USD by 2030 at an estimated annual growth rate of 5,8%

(Ariella, 2023).

We are currently witnessing yet another systemic transformation of fashion, and once again this transformation will have consequence on the creative practice of fashion design: the rapid evolution of generative artificial intelligence. In a report on generative AI in fashion published by the consultancy firm McKinsey in March 2023, a highly optimistic prognosis is made: “From codesigning to speeding content development processes, generative AI creates new spaces for creativity. It can input all forms of ‘unstructured’ data – raw text, images, and video – and output new forms of media, ranging from fully-written scripts to 3-D design and realistic virtual models for video campaigns.” (Harreis et al., 2023, p. 2)

This boundless confidence in generative AI makes sense from an economic perspective, as the nascent technology promises to “help fashion businesses become more productive, get to market faster and serve customers better”, to quote the McKinsey report again (ibid., p. 1). The fashion industry is a global behemoth with an enormous environmental and social footprint, and it is deeply entangled in the current climate crisis (Hibberd, 2018). If generative AI can augment the fashion industry and make it more efficient in its current hyper-globalized state, which aspects will be optimized, and which ones will become increasingly obsolete?

What makes contemporary fashion so ideally suited to be enhanced by generative AI? In this paper, I use the advent of generative artificial intelligence in fashion as a starting point to critically examine the tenets of contemporary fashion design.

My claim is that in the past decade, the fashion industry has paved the way for generative AI to take over its creative processes. The fashion industry has been suffering from a deep creative crisis for years, and I will use an exemplary case study to describe and analyze this crisis, and discuss the dedication to visual literacy and academic referencing competences in fashion design curricula to overcome the stasis of self-reference in fashion.

Self-Reference in Contemporary Fashion

A simple yellow cotton T-shirt with the red logo of global logistics company DHL, of all things, was one of fashion’s “key pieces” of 2016. The T-shirt was presented on October 1st 2015 during Paris Fashion Week, when the fashion show of Vetements’ women’s collection for Spring/Summer 2016 was opened by a shaven-headed male model.

It was Russian fashion designer Gocha Rubchinskiy, who wore the ominous DHL T-shirt under a plain black short-sleeved shirt paired with black leather trousers. Rubchinskiy is close friends with Lotta Volkova, who back then was the stylist and muse of Vetements designer Demna Gvasalia. The T-shirt sparked heated debates, not least because of its hefty price tag of 245 € and the provocation of turning the most mundane of garments into a high-fashion object. The almost identical T-shirt was also available in the DHL merchandising shop at a price of around 6 USD for orders of 250 or more. Nevertheless, of course, the version by Vetements became an internet sensation and purportedly was sold out in no time.

In an interview with the British daily newspaper “The Telegraph” a few months after the runway show, Demna Gvasalia explained the choice of printing a DHL logo on a T-shirt by saying that he is constantly confronted with DHL in his work and that DHL had therefore logically become part of the collection (Finnigan, 2016).

Indeed, DHL exemplifies the logistical challenges associated with the globalization and acceleration of the fashion industry. Shipping services like DHL ensure that fabrics, samples and collections arrive on time at factories, studios, showrooms and shops, that the tightly timed cycle of design, presentation, production and distribution runs smoothly, that delays and hold-ups in the production chain are made up for and that customers can hold the coveted pieces in their hands. Anyone who has ever bought fashion online knows about the fundamental importance of tracking numbers and the anxiety about missed DHL deliveries.

Marcel Duchamp originated the gesture of alienating an industrially manufactured object from its original purpose, placing it in a new context and declaring it a work of art. With the DHL T-shirt, Vetements re-signified a symbol of capitalist commodity circulation and declared it a fashionable “must have” in a process reminiscent of the alienating reinterpretation of the ready-made object in art. However, while Duchamp recalibrated the relationship between artist-subject and artwork-object with the famous urinal, a bottle dryer, a snow shovel and other so-called *objets trouvés*, the incorporation of the DHL T-shirt into Vetements’ prêt-à-porter show amounted to a shallow commentary on the fashion system’s fixation on logos, names and designers as celebrities (Titton, 2016, p. 72).

Retrospectively, it is mindboggling to reconstruct

the hype around that DHL T-shirt, and sadly, its story reads as a blueprint for what the rise of influencers and clickbait-marketing has grown into. Shortly after it was shown on the runway in Paris, the Vetements for DHL T-shirt was available online in much cheaper versions, as was the long black Vetements mackintosh presented in the same fashion show. For the fake version, the white logo lettering on the back of the rain coat was replaced with the word “VETEMEME”, thus creating a product that meme-fied the label, but also the corresponding virtual hype.

In October 2015, just days after the fashion show featuring the DHL T-shirt, Demna Gvasalia succeeded Alexander Wang as Artistic Director of the venerable Parisian fashion house Balenciaga. Since then, Gvasalia has essentially cloned the design strategy of Vetements at the fashion house owned by luxury conglomerate Kering. He has radically rebranded the company, and has turned Balenciaga into one of the most hyped global fashion brands. The brand became famous for drawing on an aesthetic of 1990s anti-fashion infused with post-Soviet nostalgia, and for elevating everyday garments into the high fashion sphere (Bartlett, 2019, p. 35). Gvasalia and his team design at Balenciaga revel in memories of their teenage years, of a time before the internet and the constant availability and global dissemination of fashion images, when all you had to keep up with trends were fashion magazines that were difficult to get, and when styling what you owned was the only fashionable resource available. In this sense, Balenciaga's fashion is not contemporary at all; rather, Gvasalia resuscitates fashion scenes from his past and mixes them with references to the work of 1990s anti-fashion designers like Martin Margiela. Gvasalia has turned Balenciaga into a fashion label that is based largely on internet hype and has turned a Parisian fashion house into meme fashion or Post-Internet fashion, making enormous profits from garments that are essentially Balenciaga merchandise sold at very high prices. The latest provocation by the brand is a skirt made out of a terry cloth towel sold at a price of 695 €.¹

The lack of refinement and creativity in Balenciaga garments and designs are compensated for by a skillful use of the aesthetics of contemporary dystopias. For example, in the campaign video

produced for the presentation of the Spring/Summer 2020 collection, a fake television news channel features models as news anchors whose facial expressions have been manipulated by AI. The model-avatars present fake news reports and encourage the viewers to buy Balenciaga sunglasses to protect them from an upcoming solar eclipse. The advertising campaigns of Balenciaga regularly draw on visual motives of the climate catastrophe (floods, wildfires) to sell merchandise, and the brand uses catastrophes of the present (climate change, mass migration, war) as aesthetic inspiration. The brand deliberately associates itself with new simulation technologies in its advertising campaigns and fashion events. The Balenciaga imaginary is animated with characters who are alienated from their reality, who wear even more alienating clothes, the textile wrecks of an urban uniform for a generation that refuses to signify an identity or that resorts to other means to construct an identity. In other words, Gvasalia has elevated copying to the leading design principle and trolling² to a PR gag at Balenciaga.

Balenciaga currently stands at the tail end of the long end of fashion declared by Teri Agins two decades ago: the brand thrives from its mass following in social media and season after season it repeats its formulaic, anonymized uniform of sweatshirts, leggings, denim, hoodies and oversize outerwear, like a very poorly prompted generative AI. Gvasalia's work at Balenciaga epitomizes the end of the cultural significance of fashion design: with his denial and devaluation of originality, creativity and experiment, and with little attention to details, materials, shapes and silhouettes, he has paved the way for fashion generated by AI. The Balenciaga garments (whether they are real or fake is irrelevant) all look the same, and they do because they lack the creativity and inventiveness that distinguishes fashion design as a unique craft tradition and *savoir-faire*. Of course, it is unfair to castigate Gvasalia alone for steering fashion design into cultural and social obsolescence. His work at the helm of Balenciaga is only the tip of the iceberg, and the result of an industry whose ever-increasing

1 <https://www.balenciaga.com/en-it/balenciaga-towel-skirt-beige-768726TPP919501.html>, last accessed on Dec. 26, 2023.

2 The Urban Dictionary defines trolling on the internet as “the deliberate act, (by a Troll – noun or adjective), of making random unsolicited and/or controversial comments on various internet forums with the intent to provoke an emotional knee jerk reaction from unsuspecting readers to engage in a fight or argument.” See <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Trolling>, last accessed on Dec. 26, 2023.

speed and high demand of products at every price range force fashion designers to accelerate their design process, and to do so with low production costs and high profits in mind. Given the systematic denial of fashion design understood as *intentional* creation by mainstream luxury fashion labels, fashion's creative process was already heavily revolving around self-reference and copying. However, this time around it is the technology of generative AI that is drawing on auto-reference, prompted by fashion's own self-referential human protagonists.

Teaching Fashion Design and Visual Literacy

If fashion designs produced by generative AI are so uncannily realistic and often much more constructed and nuanced than the actual garments we can buy in stores, that has to do with the fact that AI is trained on already existing source material. If the source material consists of a visual fashion culture that is itself the result of a generation of fashion designers who draw on the same, repetitive and narrow visual canon, then it is the lack of creative power of human fashion designers like Demna Gvasalia that needs to change.

As James Hutson remarks, “the original human creativity that serves as the bedrock for the work generated is an inescapable factor that must be considered.” (Hutson, 2023) In fashion design, the creative process revolves around the conversion of creative ideas into shapes and silhouettes. How are these creative ideas developed? Sketching, drawing, experimenting with material on a doll, and making collages are among the ways to generate ideas, but also extensive primary and secondary research. It is at this crucial stage of design development that the process of fashion design can be expanded and deepened. A broader, expansive, extensive research praxis has the potential to open and diversify the creative process of fashion design, and ultimately, to have a lasting and systemic impact on the fashion system. I argue that the logic behind academic research should be incorporated into the practice of fashion design, so as to substitute the dictum of copying and referencing and to expand the practice of fashion design.

Between 2021 and 2023, I have co-supervised the development of research books with students in the third and final, fourth year of their studies at the Fashion Design diploma program at the Universi-

ty of Applied Arts Vienna³. As a starting point and on-going practice accompanying their design development, students were asked to put together a research book with a length of 150 pages for third year students, and 300 pages for diploma students. A selection of the most interesting research books was exhibited at the annual end-of-year graduation festival, and the research books were thus given equal weight as finished outfits and silhouettes. For their research book, students were encouraged to assemble visual and textual material from a wide variety of sources, and took part in a research strategies workshop led by myself. A crucial requirement for the research book was that every single item in the book – textual or visual – had to be included in a bibliography. This also means that every image had to have both a caption and a citation. In the research strategies workshop, students were taught not only how to properly reference images, but they were also introduced to research in the so-called “deep web”, that is, to research in the infinitely vast and ever-expanding world of databases, digital archives, catalogs and research tools. As an avid user of the deep web in my own research practice, I refused to merely send students back to the library as a panacea to cure their addiction to research in the so-called “surface web” (i.e., in social media and Google search). Rather, I persuaded my students to expand and deepen their research practice and to embrace curiosity and the quest for knowledge as guiding principles for their design development. They were motivated to cultivate a spirit of inquiry in their research process, and to use all the resources and tools available to them. In my experience, this approach was much more productive and constructive than demonizing online research in toto while glorifying research in the library with physical books as the only legitimate research strategy. The research book as a veritable catalog for design development stands in stark contrast to the mood board, a collage of “mute” images found for the most part on Pinterest, Instagram and Google Image Search. The mood board yields associative visual assemblages that might be aesthetically appealing and explorative, but it usually lacks complete, traceable and comprehensible informa-

³ British fashion designer Grace Wales Bonner was the head of the Fashion Design Department during this period and has introduced the research book into the list of requirements for fashion design students. She draws on an extensive research practice for her own fashion label but also in her projects as curator.

tion about the images it comprises, and therefore, it lacks crucial contextual knowledge about the authorship, history and layers of meaning that inform the visual material that often forms the basis of design development. The mood board contributes significantly to breeding the visual monoculture of fashion because it implicitly supports the outdated idea of the creative process as the result of spontaneous aesthetic inspiration and as an inherently unintelligible activity.

Visual literacy, understood as the capacity to read images, to place them in their context and to understand the many layers of meaning and history that images transmit, should be considered an essential skill in every academic fashion design curriculum⁴. Visual literacy should be integrated in the very process of design development with the requirement to provide essential contextual information about visual and textual material alike. By extension, this means that the praxis of academic referencing should not remain confined to subjects such as fashion history or cultural studies. The following quote by visual studies scholar James Elkins underlines the didactic potential of visual literacy: “It is time to consider the possibility that literacy can be achieved through images as well as texts and numbers.” (Elkins 2007, p. 5). While Elkins discusses visual literacy as an essential competence in the humanities, in particular in art history, I argue that it is equally important for design disciplines.

Conclusion

In the wake of the global uproar of the Black Lives Matter movement and the simultaneous quest for the decolonization of Eurocentric knowledge in institutions such as museums and universities, scholars and educators are faced with the challenge to update, deepen and broaden their syllabi and expand their research libraries (Cheang et al., 2021; Gaugele & Titton, 2019). Visual literacy is instrumental in decolonizing fashion education, which means first and foremost de-centering the Eurocentric view on fashion and assuming a multitude of perspectives on fashion, dress, clothing, culture, capitalism and politics. Given the enormous environmental footprint and

the human and societal cost of the fashion industry, it is our shared responsibility as fashion educators to work towards a better, more sustainable and ethical future. A commitment to visual literacy as the result of a deep and extensive research practice in every stage of the design process will contribute to educating students to think critically and develop design solutions that are conscious of the systemic crises the fashion industry is affected by and responsible for. An ever-growing and diversified sustainability movement operates on a local and global scale towards at least a mitigation of the effects of inevitable climate change and towards a renewal of the fashion industry. There are countless highly innovative, productive and constructive initiatives and propositions to address sustainability issues and to ultimately curb the uncontrolled growth of the fashion industry. While much scholarly attention and research has been devoted to the search for solutions to tackle the environmental and social crisis of fashion, the consideration of the creative crisis of the fashion industry deserves more academic interest and more attention from critical fashion scholars and practitioners.

Like every major technological evolution before, the rapid growth of generative AI puts long-standing hierarchies and long-held beliefs into question (Manyika, 2022). This historical moment offers the possibility to update the way in which we teach fashion design, and to move beyond the closed loop of self-reference, instead of just following the industry's beaten paths.

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⁴ For reasons of brevity, the many debates around the definition of visual literacy are omitted from this paper, but the interested reader is directed to the work of Elkins (Elkins, 2003, 2007).

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