

READING FASHION FROM THE THRESHOLD

DISCURSIVE INSTABILITY AND THE GEOPOLITICS OF FASHION'S PERIPHERY

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Abstract

This article examines fashion as a self-descriptive discursive system whose coherence depends on the spatial displacement of instability. Drawing on Roland Barthes, John Agnew and Yuri Lotman, it argues that fashion stabilises meaning at its symbolic centre while relegating ambiguity, excess and residue to peripheral zones. Sustainability and circularity are therefore analysed not only as corrective frameworks, but also as modes of self-description through which fashion absorbs critique while leaving structural asymmetries largely intact.

Methodologically, the article adopts a critical-semiotic case study approach grounded in a broader research trajectory on the geopolitics of fashion, global fashion circuits and textile debris in Chile. It analyses Chile, and particularly the Atacama Desert, through academic literature, media reports, institutional materials and selected cultural interventions related to second-hand clothing and textile waste.

By introducing the concept of the semiotic threshold, the article identifies internal zones where translation intensifies and fashion's discursive coherence becomes fragile. At these thresholds, second-hand garments oscillate between commodity and waste, visibility and marginality, value and residue. The analysis considers *Atacama Fashion Week/Desierto Vestido*, *RFD Tarapacá* and *El Gigante Vestido* as semiotic interventions that contest the symbolic death of discarded garments.

Keywords: *Geopolitics of fashion; Semiotic threshold; Textile waste; Circularity; Global South.*

INTRODUCTION

Fashion has increasingly been analysed not only as a creative industry or an aesthetic phenomenon, but as a cultural system that produces, organises and stabilises meaning. Beyond garments and trends, fashion operates through codes, images, institutions and media infrastructures that define what counts as fashion, what is valued and what remains marginal.

From Barthes' analysis of fashion as a system of signs to more recent studies of fashion mediation, fashion studies has shown that fashion is not simply reflected in language and images; it is produced through them.

This article approaches fashion as a self-descriptive discursive system. By self-description, I refer to

fashion's capacity to narrate its own operations, absorb critique and present itself as coherent despite the contradictions that sustain it.

Narratives of creativity, innovation, sustainability, circularity and responsibility do not merely describe the system; they participate in its symbolic maintenance. They stabilise certain values at the centre while displacing ambiguity, excess and residue toward peripheral zones.

This tension becomes especially visible in relation to second-hand clothing and textile waste.

Selected second-hand garments may be framed as ethical, circular, vintage or responsible, while large volumes of used clothing circulate through global redistribution networks and eventually accumulate in peripheral territories as waste.

The question is therefore not only how fashion produces waste, but how it symbolically manages the instability produced by that waste.

The article asks how the global fashion system maintains discursive coherence by spatially displacing instability, and how peripheral territories become semiotic thresholds where fashion's excess, ambiguity and residue accumulate.

It argues that Chile, and particularly the Atacama Desert, functions as one such threshold.

Through the circulation, classification, partial revalorisation and accumulation of second-hand garments, northern Chile becomes a site where the limits of fashion's self-description materialise. This is especially visible in illegal textile dumps in desert areas, where garments that can no longer be stabilised as commodities remain as material residues of global fashion circulation.

To develop this argument, the article first clarifies its critical-semiotic methodology, then brings critical geopolitics into dialogue with semiotic theory. It analyses second-hand clothing as a site of ambiguous value before examining Chile and the Atacama Desert as a threshold where fashion's displaced contradictions become visible.

Finally, it considers creative interventions that emerge from this threshold as temporary semiotic reactivations rather than systemic solutions.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH: A CRITICAL-SEMIOTIC CASE STUDY

This article adopts a critical-semiotic case study approach grounded in the author's broader research trajectory on the geopolitics of fashion, global fashion circuits and textile debris in Chile.

This research examines fashion as a system of symbolic power that participates in the production of spatial hierarchies, cultural asymmetries and peripheral zones of value extraction, redistribution and residue.

The present article develops one specific line of that trajectory by focusing on Chile and the Atacama Desert as a semiotic threshold of global fashion.

The article also builds on previous research on the geopolitics of fashion and textile debris in Chile, which examined the relationship between global textile production networks, the entry of textile waste through Iquique and the socio-environmental effects of illegal dumps in Alto Hospicio through field-based observations, interviews, documentary analysis and design activism practices (Pino Ahumada, 2023).

In the present article, these situated observations are combined with a documentary and interpretative corpus composed of academic literature, media reports, institutional materials and selected cultural interventions.

The methodological aim is not to produce a quantitative account of textile waste flows, nor a full ethnographic reconstruction of the Atacama Desert as a field site.

Rather, the article analyses how the accumulation of second-hand clothing and textile waste in northern Chile becomes meaningful within the global fashion system. The corpus includes literature on critical geopolitics, semiotics, fashion discourse, sustainability and second-hand economies; media and visual narratives concerning illegal textile dumps; and materials related to *Atacama Fashion Week/Desierto Vestido*, *RFD Tarapacá* and *El Gigante Vestido*.

These materials are read through critical geopolitics and Lotmanian semiotics in order to understand how excess is displaced, partially translated and symbolically managed at the periphery.

This combination of situated research and interpretative analysis is important because the article treats Atacama neither as an isolated environmental case nor as a metaphor detached from material conditions. It is approached as a concrete territory through which the symbolic and geopolitical operations of fashion can be read. The selection of cases follows this methodological position. *Atacama Fashion Week/Desierto Vestido*, *RFD Tarapacá* and *El Gigante Vestido* were not chosen as representative solutions to the textile waste crisis, but as situated moments in which discarded garments become visible through different regimes of meaning.

Each case activates a distinct semiotic operation: denunciation, territorial circular design and patrimonial-landscape intervention.

Reading them together makes it possible to examine how the same material condition-discarded clothing in northern Chile-can be translated through different cultural languages without necessarily resolving the structural asymmetries that produced it.

FASHION, DISCOURSE AND GEOPOLITICAL SPACE

Fashion is not only a material industry; it is also a discursive system that produces value through language, images, institutions, media and spatial

hierarchies. As Roland Barthes (1983) showed, fashion does not reside solely in clothing as material object, but in the discursive operations through which garments are described and rendered meaningful.

Yuniya Kawamura (2005) later emphasised the institutional conditions through which designers, media, schools, museums, retailers and markets collectively recognise fashion as fashion. Following Michel Foucault (1972), discourse should be understood not as a neutral description of reality, but as a productive field that constitutes objects of knowledge and regimes of visibility. Stuart Hall's (1997) work on representation further clarifies how meaning is produced through selection, framing and exclusion. Fashion's legitimacy is therefore produced through systems of mediation and recognition. This production of legitimacy has spatial consequences. Fashion does not distribute symbolic value evenly. Paris, Milan, London and New York function not only as geographical locations, but as symbolic centres of creativity, authorship, innovation and trend leadership. By contrast, many territories in the Global South are more frequently represented through labour, manufacturing, extraction, reuse, redistribution or disposal than through their capacity to generate fashion meaning. Critical geopolitics provides a framework for analysing this symbolic ordering. For John Agnew (2003, 2010), geopolitical space is not simply given; it is produced through discourses that organise the world into centres, margins, opportunities, threats and zones of intervention. Applied to fashion, this means that centre and periphery are not only economic or geographic positions, but symbolic roles produced through narratives of value, modernity, responsibility and creativity. Fashion weeks, magazines, museums, luxury conglomerates, digital platforms, trade fairs, rankings and sustainability reports all contribute to defining which places appear authoritative and which appear secondary or residual. Agnès Rocamora's (2016) work on fashion mediation is useful here because it shows that fashion media do not simply communicate fashion; they participate in producing its temporalities, hierarchies and regimes of visibility. These infrastructures do not operate through identical languages. A runway show, an Instagram

feed, a resale platform and a sustainability report produce fashion meaning differently. Yet they can converge in stabilising a global fashion map in which symbolic centrality remains concentrated while other spaces become associated with labour, reuse or waste. Digital media have multiplied the speed and visibility of circulation, but multiplication should not be confused with equalisation. Platform visibility is structured by algorithms, commercial partnerships, influencer economies and uneven access to attention. As a result, peripheral actors may become temporarily visible without acquiring the same authority to define what fashion means. Sustainability discourse must be situated within this structure. Circularity, responsibility and ethical consumption are often presented as corrective responses to fashion's damage. However, they also function as stabilising narratives. Elizabeth Wilson's (2003) analysis of fashion's oscillation between novelty, repetition, transgression and conformity helps explain why contradiction is not external to fashion, but part of its normal operation. By translating critique into recognisable terms such as circular fashion, conscious consumption or sustainable luxury, the system can acknowledge crisis while preserving dominant structures of visibility and value. This does not mean that sustainability discourse is false or irrelevant. Rather, it means that its symbolic function must be analysed critically. The same vocabulary that can support ethical transformation can also organise selective visibility: successful cases of reuse, recycling and innovation are foregrounded, while the residual materials that cannot be reintegrated are displaced elsewhere. The question is therefore not only whether fashion becomes more sustainable, but where the unresolved contradictions of sustainability are displaced.

SEMIOSPHERE, CENTRE/ PERIPHERY AND THE SEMIOTIC THRESHOLD

To explain how fashion's discursive instability becomes spatially organised, this article draws on Yuri Lotman's (1990) theory of the semiosphere. Lotman conceptualises culture as a semiotic space composed of multiple interacting sign systems. Meaning does not emerge from isolated signs,

but from relations within a broader semiotic environment. The semiosphere is internally structured by asymmetries between centres, peripheries and boundaries.

For Lotman (1990), the centre of the semiosphere is characterised by relatively stabilised codes: dominant languages, institutions, classifications and self-descriptions acquire authority there. The periphery, by contrast, is marked by heterogeneity and contact between different semiotic languages. Peripheral zones are not external to the system; they are internal areas where meanings are less codified, where translation is more intense and where new forms may emerge. Lotman's (1990) concept of boundary is crucial because a boundary is not a simple line of separation. It is a mechanism of translation that filters and transforms elements moving between different languages or spaces.

Some elements become legible within dominant codes; others remain unstable, excessive or only partially recognised. From this framework, the article develops the concept of the semiotic threshold: an internal zone of the fashion system where translation intensifies and where the system's capacity to stabilise meaning becomes fragile. The threshold is both spatial and discursive. Spatially, it refers to territories that absorb the material consequences of fashion circulation: zones of manufacturing, redistribution, reuse, informal exchange or disposal.

Discursively, it refers to conditions in which fashion's categories become insufficient. At the threshold, garments may still be recognisable as fashion objects, but they also appear as excess, waste, residue or environmental burden.

Meaning does not disappear; it becomes unstable. The article uses the term subtranslation to describe this condition of incomplete translation. Derived from Lotman's (1990) theory of boundary translation and adapted here to fashion, subtranslation does not mean total exclusion.

It names a state of partial inclusion: objects, practices or territories are recognised by fashion but not fully integrated into its dominant language. They remain visible without becoming central, legible without becoming legitimate and meaningful without becoming stable.

Second-hand garments accumulated in peripheral territories exemplify this oscillation between commodity and residue, fashion and waste, visibility and marginality.

The concept also prevents a simplistic opposition between inclusion and exclusion. At the threshold, garments are neither simply outside fashion nor safely inside it.

They remain connected to fashion's circuits, images and narratives while simultaneously exposing what those circuits cannot stabilise.

SECOND-HAND ECONOMIES AND AMBIGUOUS VALUE

Second-hand clothing occupies a structurally ambiguous position within fashion.

It is increasingly celebrated as evidence of circularity, ethical consumption and responsible design, while also remaining associated with devaluation, informality, excess and waste.

This ambivalence reveals instability in the way fashion produces, loses and attempts to recover value.

Anthropological approaches to value help clarify this condition. Marcel Mauss (1925/1990) showed that value is produced through systems of exchange, obligation and recognition; Arjun Appadurai (1986) argued that commodities move through shifting regimes of value.

Second-hand garments make this process visible because they pass through use, donation, sorting, resale, export, reuse, disposal and sometimes creative reactivation. At each stage, their meaning must be translated again.

Recent scholarship has framed waste, circularity and second-hand consumption as central fields of transformation. Tufarelli (2026) approaches waste streams as strategic sites through which circular fashion manufacturing can be reorganised within territorialised production systems. Spagnoli (2026) argues that circularity is not merely technical, but a systemic transition involving infrastructures, coordination and the resemantisation of value.

Giraldi, Maini and Morelli (2024) identify second-hand shopping, sharing practices and conscious consumption as pathways through which sustainable fashion behaviours may emerge. These perspectives show that waste and second-hand clothing are no longer marginal topics. However, this article approaches them from their point of failure.

It asks what happens when waste cannot be reintegrated, when circularity cannot be completed and when second-hand garments cannot be successfully resemantised as desirable, ethical

or sustainable objects. The problem is not only how fashion creates circular value, but how it manages residues that resist both circular retranslation into meaning and retransaction into economic value. Within central fashion spaces, selected second-hand garments can be recoded as vintage, archival, rare, curated or circular.

Their previous use becomes a source of distinction rather than stigma. Curatorial practices, branding, resale platforms and visual mediation translate used garments back into fashion language.

Yet this stabilisation is selective.

Karen Tranberg Hansen and Jennifer Le Zotte's (2019) work on changing second-hand economies is useful here because it shows that used clothing has long occupied a shifting position between commerce, charity, stigma, repair and revaluation.

Large volumes move through redistribution networks as compressed bales, often stripped of individual distinction. Some garments are sorted, repaired or resold; others remain damaged, unsuitable, low-quality or economically unviable.

This distinction is essential because the same term, second-hand, can refer to very different realities:

a curated vintage piece in a central boutique, a garment selected for resale in a local market, a bale of low-value imports, or a discarded item in an illegal dump. The category is therefore internally uneven.

From the perspective of the semiotic threshold, second-hand clothing is a site of value oscillation.

A garment may remain materially intact and recognisable as clothing while no longer functioning as fashion. It may retain use value but lose exchange value; it may retain symbolic traces of a previous life but fail to acquire new meaning in the receiving context.

This instability is intensified by the scale and speed of contemporary circulation.

The greater the volume of garments entering second-hand routes, the more difficult it becomes for local economies to retranslate them into durable value. Peripheral territories therefore receive not only material excess, but unstable value. They become responsible for sorting, absorbing, transforming or discarding what central markets have expelled. This is why second-hand economies cannot be read only through the optimistic language of circularity.

They are also spaces where the limits of circularity become visible. Figure 01 synthesises the relationship between the semiotic threshold and ambiguous value developed in Sections 4 and 5. It shows how second-hand garments move from central fashion narratives into redistribution circuits and, at the threshold, are either resemantised, creatively reactivated or displaced as residue.

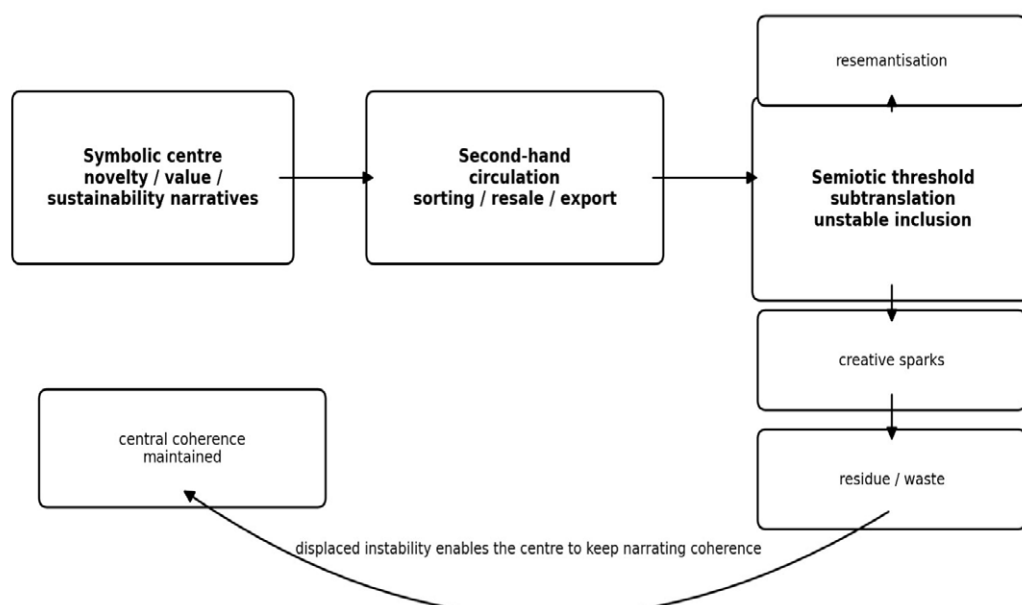


Fig. 01

CHILE, ATACAMA AND THE GEOPOLITICS OF TEXTILE WASTE

Chile offers a revealing case for analysing the geopolitical and semiotic displacement of fashion's excess. Located along the western edge of South America, Chile occupies a complex position within global circuits of trade, extraction, cultural production and consumption.

Its economic openness, port infrastructure, free trade zones and internal inequalities have positioned it as an important site within the circulation of second-hand clothing.

Northern Chile is especially significant.

The region of Tarapacá, where Iquique and Alto Hospicio are located, is central to the reception, sorting, redistribution and disposal of used garments. Iquique's free trade zone, ZOFRI, has played a key role in facilitating the import and redistribution of second-hand clothing.

Recent research estimates that approximately 40% of used textiles imported by mass into Chile enter through Iquique, while ZOFRI operates as a major logistical and commercial infrastructure for these flows (Morell-Delgado, Talens Peiró, & Toboso-Chavero, 2025).

The garments that arrive in northern Chile do not follow a single trajectory.

Some are sorted, resold locally, or re-exported to other Latin American markets.

Others lose value during classification and redistribution. Garments that are damaged, unsuitable for local demand, or economically unviable fall out of resale circuits and accumulate in informal or illegal textile dumps, particularly around Alto Hospicio. Located near Iquique in Chile's Tarapacá Region, within the broader Atacama Desert zone, Alto Hospicio is a commune and city that has become one of the territories most visibly associated with illegal textile dumps in northern Chile.

This trajectory shows that the problem cannot be reduced to local mismanagement. Local actors participate in sorting, selling, selecting, and reusing garments, but they do so within a global system that sends unstable material value toward territories with limited capacity to absorb its excess.

The Atacama Desert must not be read as an empty landscape. It is a complex geographical, cultural, economic and symbolic territory in northern Chile, associated with aridity, mining, astronomy, tourism, heritage, urban settlements and local communities.

The illegal textile dumps near Alto Hospicio are part of this inhabited geography.

They are not outside society; they are produced by a territorial system shaped by trade, labour, informality, environmental vulnerability and global consumption. This distinction matters because international images of clothing mountains in the desert can easily reproduce the idea of Atacama as a remote empty space.

A threshold reading instead insists that these dumps are located in relation to people, infrastructures, labour practices and territorial histories.

This territorial specificity is crucial for avoiding a reductive reading of the desert as a distant dumping ground detached from social life.

Alto Hospicio, in particular, is not only a point on the map near the textile dumps; it is part of a wider urban and logistical ecology linked to Iquique, ZOFRI, informal commerce, migration, labour and regional inequality.

The presence of discarded garments in the desert therefore condenses several scales at once: global overproduction, transnational second-hand trade, national regulatory gaps, regional infrastructures and local forms of work and survival.

Previous research on textile debris in Chile has shown that the problem cannot be understood only through the language of waste management, since the accumulation of garments also modifies territorial imaginaries and social relations (Pino Ahumada, 2023). The dump becomes a place where global fashion is reterritorialised: garments designed, purchased and discarded elsewhere acquire a new and unstable visibility in northern Chile. This reterritorialisation is what gives the Atacama case its analytical force.

The desert does not merely receive unwanted material; it makes visible the geopolitical chain that allows the centre to preserve its narratives of novelty, consumption and circular responsibility while the material remainder is displaced to the periphery.

From a semiotic perspective, these dumps are threshold spaces where garments that once circulated as signs of novelty, identity, brand value or aspiration become residues.

They are still recognisable as clothing, and sometimes as branded fashion objects, but they no longer operate within central codes of desirability, seasonality or consumption. They materialise subtranslation: partially legible,

but no longer fully translatable into fashion's dominant language of value. The dump is therefore not only a site of environmental degradation. It is also a scene in which the semiotic exhaustion of fashion becomes visible: labels, colours, fabrics and silhouettes persist, but the codes that once gave them value no longer hold.

The Chilean case resonates with other Global South sites of second-hand clothing circulation, particularly Kantamanto Market in Accra, Ghana. Both cases reveal how territories in the Global South receive the excess of Global North consumption and are required to sort, repair, recommodify or discard it.

Yet the two cases operate through different spatial configurations. Kantamanto is structured around a dense urban market ecology of labour, repair, resale and waste. Atacama is marked by the spectacular visibility of illegal textile dumps in desert landscapes. In Chile, fashion's residue becomes amplified through its encounter with the desert: the dump becomes image, symbol and geopolitical accusation. The comparison is not intended to transform the article into a comparative study, but to show that Atacama belongs to a broader geography of displacement while retaining a specific semiotic intensity. The Atacama Desert therefore functions as a semiotic threshold because it concentrates three forms of instability. First, material instability: garments that cannot be reintegrated into resale or circular systems accumulate as waste. Second, symbolic instability: objects that were once meaningful as fashion become ambiguous residues. Third, geopolitical instability: the unresolved contradictions of consumption, sustainability and responsibility are displaced from central markets toward peripheral territories.

The case also demonstrates that visibility is not the same as transformation.

The Atacama dumps have become globally recognisable, but global recognition does not automatically redistribute responsibility or change the structures of overproduction, export and dumping that produced them.

CREATIVE SPARKS AT THE THRESHOLD

Although the semiotic threshold functions as a zone where fashion's instability is displaced and accumulated, it is not a space of pure passivity. Following Yuri Lotman (1990), peripheries can also

be sites of heightened semiotic activity because they bring heterogeneous codes, materials, actors and temporalities into contact.

In the Atacama case, textile waste has generated cultural practices that attempt to reactivate meaning from within the space of residue. This article conceptualises these practices as creative sparks: episodic semiotic interventions that momentarily interrupt the meanings assigned to discarded garments.

They are not equivalent to systemic innovation. They do not necessarily produce scalable solutions, stable markets or enduring transformations. Their significance lies in exposing the limits of fashion's self-description by reactivating materials that the system has pushed toward symbolic death. Symbolic death is central here.

When garments accumulate in illegal dumps, they lose more than economic value. They lose their position within the recognised language of fashion. They are no longer new, desirable, seasonal, authored or properly circulated. The dump operates as a cemetery of fashion: a place where garments remain materially present but symbolically exhausted. Creative sparks contest this condition by returning discarded textiles to the field of signs. A first creative spark is represented by *Atacama Fashion Week*, an intervention associated with *Desierto Vestido* and Fashion Revolution Brazil in which models wore garments recovered from a textile dump in the Atacama Desert, as reported by The Guardian (2024, May 8).

Unlike a conventional fashion event, it did not operate primarily as a market-oriented runway. Its force lay in the visual confrontation between discarded garments, bodies and the desert landscape. The runway became a device of denunciation: it used fashion's own visual grammar to expose fashion's residual violence.

In this case, discarded garments are not simply restored as desirable objects.

They are made to appear as witnesses of a crisis. Their re-entry into visibility is accusatory rather than celebratory.

A second creative spark is *Runway Fashion Design Tarapacá*, particularly the *Pasarela RFD Tarapacá Circular y Sostenible 2025*.

RFD Tarapacá is structured as a territorial, collaborative and institutional platform involving designers, artisans and regional communities. Its 2025 runway took place at the former *Humberstone saltpeter works* in Pozo Almonte,

Tarapacá (Runway Fashion Design, 2025). This location matters: *Humberstone* is a heritage site marked by extraction, labour history and desert materiality. By staging circular fashion there, *RFD Tarapacá* connects recovered textiles to territorial history, craft knowledge and the memory of resource economies in northern Chile. Unlike *Atacama Fashion Week*, which confronts the dump directly, *RFD Tarapacá* translates the crisis through design, collaboration and regional identity. It therefore shows another possible language of the threshold: not only denunciation, but territorial rearticulation.

The involvement of Ágatha Ruiz de la Prada in the broader *RFD* trajectory clarifies the ambivalence of recognition from the centre. Her visit to textile dumps in northern Chile and her public statements on the importance of seeing what is happening there demonstrate that the crisis can become visible to central fashion actors. Yet visibility does not necessarily redistribute the power to translate meaning. The centre may witness the threshold, photograph it and acknowledge its urgency, while the authority to aestheticise, narrate and valorise waste remains concentrated in central fashion circuits.

Her later collaboration with Humana, produced from used garments selected and processed at Humana's Leganés plant in Madrid, should therefore not be confused with a collection made from Atacama garments (Humana, 2025). The distinction reinforces the argument: peripheral reality becomes symbolically available, but the power to reframe it remains centred.

This distinction also helps refine the notion of recentralisation. The visit to the dumps produces a moment of recognition: a central fashion figure sees the threshold and acknowledges its urgency. Yet the subsequent transformation of used garments into high-value upcycling within a European fashion week demonstrates that recognition can remain asymmetrical.

The centre can incorporate the affective and visual force of peripheral waste without transferring authorship, infrastructure or decision-making power to the territory where that waste accumulates. In semiotic terms, the Atacama becomes available as an image and warning, while the authorised act of translation continues to occur elsewhere.

A third creative spark is *El Gigante Vestido*, an ephemeral artistic intervention inspired

by the Gigante de Tarapacá, the monumental pre-Hispanic anthropomorphic geoglyph located on Cerro Unita, in Huara, Tarapacá.

The project reinterprets this ancestral figure through the temporary arrangement of discarded garments, linking textile waste to territory, heritage, overconsumption and environmental fragility (Universidad Finis Terrae, 2023).

Rather than returning discarded clothing to the runway or translating it into circular design, *El Gigante Vestido* moves textile waste into a territorial and patrimonial register. It confronts the long duration of cultural memory and landscape with the accelerated temporality of fashion consumption. This operation is crucial because it allows textile waste to speak through a semiotic system other than fashion itself.

The garment becomes a sign of rupture between contemporary consumption and ancestral territorial inscription.

For this reason, *El Gigante Vestido* is not simply an example of upcycling or environmental communication. Its critical force lies in the collision between two forms of inscription: the ancient mark of the geoglyph and the contemporary mark of textile residue. The intervention suggests that fashion waste is also a territorial writing, one that inscribes the speed of consumption onto landscapes shaped by much longer cultural and ecological temporalities.

Together, these three creative sparks show that threshold interventions can operate through different semiotic languages: visual denunciation, territorial circular design and patrimonial-landscape intervention. None solves the textile waste crisis. They do not stop the arrival of second-hand clothing, dismantle illegal dumps or redistribute responsibility across the fashion system. Their force is semiotic rather than infrastructural. They make contradiction perceptible and temporarily restore semiotic agency to garments rendered residual. At the same time, they remain vulnerable to recentralisation.

Once photographed, circulated or incorporated into sustainability narratives, threshold interventions can become aesthetic content for the centre. This ambivalence is precisely why they are analytically important.

DISCUSSION: DISCURSIVE INSTABILITY AND THE GEOPOLITICS OF FASHION

The analysis shows that discursive instability is not a marginal dysfunction of fashion, but one of its structural conditions. Fashion maintains coherence by translating contradiction into recognisable narratives: novelty, creativity, sustainability, circularity, responsibility and innovation. Yet not all material consequences can be translated into these narratives.

What resists translation is displaced.

The semiotic threshold makes this displacement visible. Thresholds are not outside the system; they are internal zones of unstable inclusion. They receive, process, absorb, reinterpret or expose residues generated by fashion circulation.

Chile and the Atacama Desert reveal this mechanism with particular clarity. The garments accumulated near Alto Hospicio are not external accidents or local anomalies; they are material traces of a global system that produces more value, novelty, circulation and residue than it can symbolically stabilise.

This finding complicates dominant narratives of sustainability. Circularity assumes that materials can be reintroduced into circulation through design, recycling, resale, repair or conscious consumption. These practices are important, but they do not exhaust the problem.

Atacama shows that circularity also produces a remainder: garments that cannot be resold, repaired, recycled or resemantised.

The existence of this remainder does not invalidate circularity as an aspiration; it reveals its geopolitical limits. The problem is therefore material and semiotic. Some second-hand garments can be recoded as vintage, curated, ethical or circular, while others remain subtranslated residues. They are visible but not legitimised, recognisable but not reabsorbed. Peripheral spaces receive unresolved value and become responsible for managing what the centre cannot narrate. The comparison with Kantamanto shows that this is not an isolated Chilean anomaly, but part of a broader Global South condition of receiving, sorting, recommercialising and discarding the excess of Global North consumption.

This condition is geopolitical because it distributes not only goods, but also interpretative burdens. Peripheral territories are required to make sense of, extract value from, or dispose of materials

whose original systems of meaning were produced elsewhere.

Creative sparks reinforce this ambivalence.

Atacama Fashion Week, *RFD Tarapacá* and *El Gigante Vestido* demonstrate that threshold spaces are not mute. They generate critique, visibility, territorial design and artistic intervention. However, their force lies in making contradiction perceptible, not in resolving the infrastructure of overproduction, export, local dumping or uneven responsibility.

Once mediated and circulated, these interventions may also be recentralised as spectacle, content or sustainability storytelling.

This does not mean that semiotic interventions are politically irrelevant. In some contexts, symbolic disruption can become infrastructural change when it is translated into regulation, economic obligation, logistical systems, institutional accountability or new forms of material governance.

Creative sparks may therefore become consequential if they connect to extended producer responsibility, import regulation, repair infrastructures, waste-management systems or local circular economies. Without such translation, however, their force remains primarily semiotic: they expose contradiction without materially reorganising the system.

The broader contribution of this article is to shift the analytical focus from fashion's centres to its thresholds. Fashion studies has often examined how value is produced through design, media, institutions, branding and consumption.

This remains essential. However, the Atacama case shows that fashion must also be read from spaces where value collapses, where translation fails and where residue accumulates.

These spaces are not peripheral to fashion's operation; they are necessary to its coherence. The centre depends on the threshold not only materially, because excess must go somewhere, but also semiotically, because unresolved contradiction must be kept from destabilising dominant narratives of progress, novelty and sustainability.

CONCLUSION: READING FASHION FROM THE THRESHOLD

This article has argued that fashion operates as a self-descriptive discursive system whose coherence depends on the selective translation and spatial displacement of instability.

By bringing critical geopolitics into dialogue with semiotic theory, it has shown that fashion does not merely circulate through unequal global spaces; it also participates in producing them symbolically. Narratives of creativity, sustainability, circularity and responsibility stabilise meaning at the centre while displacing ambiguity, excess and residue toward peripheral thresholds.

The concept of the semiotic threshold has been central to this argument. Developed from Lotman's theory of the semiosphere, the threshold names an internal zone of unstable inclusion where translation intensifies and where fashion's dominant codes become fragile. At the threshold, garments, practices and territories remain connected to the fashion system, but they cannot be fully integrated into its central language of novelty, desirability, authorship or circular value. Second-hand clothing makes this condition especially evident. While selected garments can be resemantised as vintage, sustainable, circular or desirable, large volumes resist revaluation and accumulate as ambiguous residues.

The illegal textile dumps near Alto Hospicio are therefore not external anomalies at the margins of fashion, but internal residues of a global system that depends on peripheral territories to absorb what central narratives cannot resolve.

Reading fashion from the threshold shifts the focus of fashion studies from the spaces where value is produced to the spaces where value collapses. It invites attention to residues, failed translations, ambiguous objects and peripheral territories that are often treated as external to fashion's symbolic order. This perspective does not deny the importance of design innovation, circular initiatives or creative responses; rather, it situates them within the structures that determine which residues can be retranslated and which remain displaced. To read fashion from the threshold is to confront the places where the system's self-description fails, and where its material and symbolic debts become impossible to ignore.

CAPTIONS

[Fig. 01] Semiotic threshold and ambiguous value in second-hand fashion. Source: Author's elaboration based on Lotman's theory of the semiosphere and the analytical framework developed in this article.

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