

THE LANGUAGES OF FASHION

CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON FASHION DISCOURSES

BENJAMIN WILD

Manchester Metropolitan University, UK

b.wild@mmu.ac.uk

Orcid: 0000-0001-7206-778X

NATALIA BERGER

Inholland University of Applied Sciences,
Netherlands

natalia.berger@inholland.nl

Orcid: 0000-0002-4083-3133

Copyright: © Author(s). This is an open access, peer-reviewed article published by Firenze University Press and distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.
Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.
Competing Interests: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest

DOI: 10.36253/fh-4228

A SYSTEM THAT SPEAKS — AND WHAT IT CANNOT SAY

Fashion has been personified as the younger sister of Death, a daughter of Caducity (Leopardi 1982). It has been described as capitalism's favourite child, conceptualised as a belief, a system, an empire (Briggs 2013; Kawamura 2023; Lipovetsky 1987). These characterisations are not merely rhetorical flourishes. They suggest that fashion's most durable power lies not only in what it makes or sells but in what it says, and in the authority it has accumulated to say it. That authority — what fashion says, how it says it, and what it is organised not to say — is the subject of this issue.

When Roland Barthes anatomised the fashion system in 1967, his central insight was both simple and disquieting: fashion's written language does not describe garments so much as it produces them. The magazine caption, the press release, the seasonal trend report: these are not neutral communications but active interventions that transform cloth and cut into meaning, desire, and social value (Barthes 1967).

Fashion's self-description, Barthes argued, is a semiotic machine of extraordinary precision. It is also, he might have added, a machine with a remarkable capacity for concealment. Berger's analysis of fashion's public discourse extends this insight, demonstrating how the industry's communicative frameworks operate not merely as description but as ideological infrastructure, organising what can be said, by whom, and in whose interests (Berger 2026). More than half a century after Barthes, that machine has grown considerably more complex. Fashion discourse now circulates across runway shows and Instagram reels, sustainability reports and activist zines, e-commerce copy and metaverse marketplaces, academic journals and influencer captions. The sheer proliferation of contexts in which fashion is spoken, written, and imaged might suggest that the system has opened up; that its formerly narrow self-description has expanded to accommodate a fuller range of voices, concerns, and ways of knowing.

This issue of Fashion Highlight asks whether that is true, and at what cost.

The response that emerges is not comfortable, though it may not be surprising. Fashion's discursive field has indeed expanded.

But expansion is not the same as transformation. What the papers in this issue demonstrate, from

multiple disciplinary vantage points and across several continents, is that fashion's dominant language continues to stabilise certain meanings while displacing others, and this stabilisation is not neutral. The meanings that are fixed, legitimised, and rendered legible are overwhelmingly those that serve white, 'western' subjects and their histories, while the aesthetics, labour, knowledge systems, and lived experiences of those positioned outside this centre are routinely absorbed, mistranslated, or rendered peripheral (Wild 2024, 2026; Berger 2026). What is rendered visible and what remains structurally unspeakable are, in this sense, racialised and geopolitical questions as much as discursive ones.

The challenge for fashion studies, and for the industry it examines, is to develop the critical literacy to name what is being concealed, and the methodological tools to study it rigorously.

THE SEMIOSPHERE AND ITS PERIPHERIES

Yuri Lotman's concept of the semiosphere offers the structural framework through which this issue is organised (1991). For Lotman, culture is not a collection of isolated sign systems but a unified semiotic space — a semiosphere — within which meaning is produced through the dynamic interplay of centre and periphery.

The centre is characterised by codified, authoritative, self-reinforcing descriptions.

The periphery is marked by heterogeneity, instability, and productive noise: it is where different sign systems come into contact, where translation is most intense, and where new meanings have the best chance of emerging.

Lotman's key warning was precisely that excessive coherence at the centre becomes a liability.

When a system's self-description achieves full structural organisation, it gains authority but loses what he called its "internal reserves of uncertainty", the capacity for flexibility, adaptation, and genuine development. A system too certain of its own language cannot hear what it does not already know how to say. Wild's argument that fashion constitutes a form of narrative knowledge — and that the dominance of "western" metanarratives within that knowledge system actively forecloses other ways of knowing — gives this structural observation its political and historical dimension (forthcoming; Lyotard 1984).

This is fashion's current condition. The dominant

language of fashion — sophisticated, aspirational, and visually seductive — has achieved a remarkable degree of structural coherence.

It knows how to speak about creativity, luxury, novelty, and, increasingly, sustainability.

It has developed an extensive vocabulary for these concepts, circulated across an equally extensive set of platforms and institutions.

What it has not developed (or has actively resisted developing) is the capacity to speak frankly about the realities that its own operations produce: the environmental damage that accumulates at the end of supply chains, the labour conditions that underpin its luxury, the cultural hierarchies that determine whose aesthetics count as fashion and whose do not, and the communities and bodies that its aspirational imagery consistently renders peripheral or invisible.

The contributions to this issue locate themselves, in different ways, at these thresholds, the zones where fashion's dominant self-description strains against the material and social realities it cannot fully absorb.

HOW MEANING IS MADE — AND STABILISED

Several papers in this issue examine the mechanisms through which fashion produces and stabilises meaning, and the ideological work that stabilisation performs. The issue opens with Bárbara Pino Ahumada's analysis of Chile and the Atacama Desert as what she calls a semiotic threshold of the global fashion system.

Drawing on Lotman alongside critical geopolitics, Pino Ahumada argues that fashion maintains its discursive coherence not despite its contradictions but by spatially displacing them.

The centre stabilises its narratives of creativity, sustainability, and circular responsibility by relegating the material residues of those narratives (e.g. used clothing, textile waste, environmental damage) to peripheral territories that absorb what the system cannot narrativise. The illegal textile dumps near Alto Hospicio are not, on this reading, accidents or anomalies. They are the necessary remainder of a system whose language of circularity depends on the existence of places where circularity fails. The centre's sustainability story requires, structurally, a periphery that cannot be told in the same terms.

This argument is developed through the concept of subtranslation, a condition of partial inclusion

in which objects, territories, and practices are recognised by fashion's dominant system but not fully integrated into its authoritative codes.

They remain visible without becoming central, legible without becoming legitimate.

It is a concept with broad analytical reach, and it resonates across several other contributions in this issue.

The mechanisms of stabilisation appear in a different register in Srijana Baruah's study of Indian fashion influencers and sustainability discourse. Where Pino Ahumada traces the spatial displacement of material residues, Baruah traces the semiotic displacement of accountability.

Through close analysis of Instagram content from four prominent influencers, she identifies four recurring communicative patterns:

1. Symbolic amplification,
2. Aestheticisation,
3. Temporal displacement,
4. Omission through which sustainability

is constructed as a cultural value while being systematically drained of material content.

Terms like “handwoven,” “artisan-made,” and “conscious” acquire ethical connotation through repetition alone, without any accompanying evidence of sourcing, labour conditions, or environmental impact. Sustainability, on this account, functions less as a practice than as a myth in Barthes' precise sense: a second-order semiological system in which historically constructed meanings are naturalised as self-evident.

What Baruah's analysis adds to Barthes is specificity of context. In India, the mythologisation of sustainability draws on deep cultural associations between craft, heritage, and moral value, associations that give influencer content its particular persuasive force.

The cultural authority of craft in the Indian context amplifies the symbolic work that sustainability signifiers perform. This is not merely greenwashing in the conventional sense of deliberate deception; it is a structural feature of influencer-led fashion communication, in which the gap between symbolic performance and material reality is built into the communicative form itself.

Huei-Wen Lo's analysis of MUJI pursues a related argument at the level of retail aesthetics.

MUJI's “no-brand” philosophy, Lo argues, is not a refusal of fashion's semiotic system but a particularly sophisticated participation in it.

Through muted colour palettes, unobtrusive packaging, orderly spatial presentation, and the careful mobilisation of cultural associations with Japanese minimalism, MUJI reorganises consumption rather than reducing it. The aesthetic of restraint performs ethical value while leaving the underlying logic of accumulation largely intact. Consumers may purchase extensively while experiencing their consumption as disciplined, moderate, and morally legitimate. The silence of MUJI's language is itself a highly articulate statement; one that, as Lo observes, has been so successfully reproduced across global retail that it has lost whatever disruptive capacity it once possessed. Anti-consumerist language becomes, in time, one of consumer capitalism's most adaptable and commercially productive grammars. Together, these three papers map a landscape in which fashion's language consistently performs meanings — relating to sustainability, responsibility, ethical production — that it does not and perhaps cannot substantiate. The system is not simply dishonest. It is structurally organised to produce the appearance of ethical engagement while insulating the conditions of production from scrutiny. The question that follows is whose interests that scrutiny serves, and whose meanings the system was organised to protect in the first place.

THE GEOPOLITICS OF FASHION'S LANGUAGES

If one axis of this issue concerns how meaning is stabilised, the other concerns whose meaning counts in the first place, and it is, if anything, the more urgent question of the two. Fashion studies has long acknowledged that the global fashion system is not a level playing field. The symbolic centres of fashion (Paris, Milan, London, New York) function not merely as geographic locations but as authoritative positions within a system of cultural production that determines which aesthetics, which practices, and which vocabularies are recognised as fashion and which are relegated to craft, folklore, or imitation (Rocamora 2002; 2009). This structural hierarchy is not only economic; it is deeply semiotic. It determines who has the authority to name, to define, and to narrate, and whose naming is treated as authoritative versus whose is absorbed, translated, or dismissed. Pino Ahumada's contribution makes this

geopolitics of meaning explicit in its examination of the Atacama Desert. The comparison she draws with Kantamanto Market in Accra, Ghana, is instructive: both sites reveal how territories in the Global South are required to receive, sort, process, and dispose of the material excess generated by consumption in the Global North.

But the Atacama case has a particular semiotic intensity. The image of mountains of discarded clothing in the desert has become globally circulated. Yet, as Pino Ahumada observes, global visibility does not redistribute responsibility. The centre can acknowledge the threshold, photograph it, and incorporate it into sustainability storytelling, while the authority to interpret, narrate, and aestheticise that reality remains concentrated in precisely the institutions whose practices produced it. Recognition without redistribution is its own form of symbolic appropriation.

Baruah's analysis of the Indian influencer economy adds a further dimension to this picture.

India occupies a complex position in the global fashion semiosphere, neither a simple periphery nor a straightforwardly emergent centre, but a site where global fashion discourses are translated, domesticated, and recirculated through local cultural frameworks. The moral authority of craft and heritage in India gives sustainability discourse a particular resonance and persuasive power that differs from its operation in European or North American contexts.

At the same time, the structural conditions that enable influencer-led greenwashing — the decentralised and largely unregulated nature of fashion production, the rapid growth of influencer-brand economies, limited regulatory enforcement — are themselves products of India's position within global fashion's economic geography. The question of language hierarchy appears in a more literal register in Carola Borgia's study of English loanwords — specifically *"hardshell"* and *"softshell"* — in Italian outdoor fashion magazines. Borgia's paper might at first appear to occupy different territory from the geopolitical concerns of the other contributions, but its implications are connected. The dominance of English as the global language of technical and commercial fashion communication is not merely a convenience. It is a structuring asymmetry that gives English-language fashion discourse a reach and authority that other languages cannot easily match, that

embeds certain values and assumptions into the vocabulary of innovation and quality, and that treats translation as a secondary or derivative act rather than a generative one. The instability Borgia documents — the proliferation of graphic variants, the semantic ambiguity, the inadequacy of Italian equivalents — is a symptom of a language navigating the terms of its own subordination. The outdoor clothing sector makes this process unusually visible precisely because its technical vocabulary is so explicitly international.

Kristen HallGeisler's paper on *The Intuitionist* (1999) engages these questions through literary analysis, reading Colson Whitehead's novel as an extended meditation on what it means to inhabit fashion's mythological system from a position it was not designed to include. Lila Mae Watson's five identical dark-blue business suits are read through Barthes' distinction between myth, the bourgeois narrative of the American dream, and Revolutionary speech. For Lila Mae, wearing the correct costume for her profession is not an act of mythological participation but of what Barthes calls Revolution: language that refuses to be naturalised, that remains stubbornly political, that announces itself as transformation rather than confirming an existing order. The suit that signals modernity and happy progress on a white male body cannot perform the same ideological function on the body of a Black woman. Fashion's mythological language has limits, and those limits are drawn along the lines of race and gender.

What emerges across these contributions is a picture of fashion's language actively producing and reproducing geopolitical hierarchy, not merely reflecting existing inequalities but constituting them through the allocation of symbolic authority, the management of visibility, and the control of translation. Naming that system, however, is not the same as analysing it; a distinction the editorial process for this issue made unusually visible.

WHAT FASHION CANNOT SAY — AND WHY THAT MATTERS

The process of editing this issue, from the drafting of the Call for Papers to the final stages of review, brought into focus for us a tendency within fashion scholarship that has, to varying degrees, materialised across these submissions: an inclination to claim discourse without demonstrating it, to invoke theoretical frameworks without systematically analysing texts or images,

and to treat theorists as sources of authority rather than as providers of specific analytical instruments. This is a critical comment, but it is not a criticism that can or should be made of individual papers. It is, as we reflected during the editorial process, a diagnosis of the field.

The study of fashion has developed sophisticated frameworks for analysing design, identity, power, and culture. Its theoretical resources are extensive and its interdisciplinary range is a genuine strength. What it has been slower to develop are the empirical methods for examining how fashion language actually functions: how specific words, images, captions, and spatial arrangements produce specific meanings in specific contexts.

Berger's work on fashion's public discourse can stand as a model here, demonstrating what it looks like to move from identifying ideology to tracing its operation in specific discursive formations (2026). The turn toward discourse in fashion studies has sometimes remained at the level of assertion rather than analysis: naming discourse rather than tracking it; identifying ideology rather than demonstrating its operation in textual or visual detail.

The methods the field needs would ideally operate at several levels: specific enough to reveal how individual product descriptions, campaign captions, or social media posts construct value, desire, and legitimacy through word choice and visual design; attentive to who is speaking, to whom, through which medium, and with what authority, since fashion discourse always reflects identifiable actors within particular power structures; and scalable enough to identify patterns across larger collections of material, showing how meanings stabilise, shift, or diminish over time. This methodological gap matters because the claims fashion studies needs to make about exclusion, about greenwashing, about geopolitical hierarchy, about the gap between what fashion says and what it does, are claims that require evidence.

The papers in this issue tend to be most persuasive where they ground their theoretical arguments in close, specific, material analysis and share a commitment to showing rather than merely claiming: to produce the evidence that makes theoretical argument answerable.

The papers that engage material intelligence and design practice — Matthew Coats' contribution on Elena Velez, Craig Green, and Amber Jae Slooten, and Michelle Marshall's study of the

fashion toile — pursue this point from a different angle. Both argue that fashion produces knowledge through making that its dominant discursive economy cannot capture. The intelligence embedded in the studio, in the negotiation between hand and cloth, in the decision-making that happens through material resistance, in the epistemic content of iterative process, does not readily translate into the communicative formats through which fashion legitimates itself.

Press releases precede patterns; digital renders eclipse seams; the capacity to produce the right words at the right moment is difficult to distinguish from the capacity to design.

This is the blind spot of fashion's language at the level of practice. The contributions on material intelligence argue not for silence but for a different kind of speech, one attentive to process, to duration, to the knowledge that emerges from sustained engagement with materials rather than from the management of their image.

Marshall's proposal that the discarded toile might become a site of material and semiotic inquiry, that the unfinished might generate meaning rather than simply awaiting completion, is both a practical intervention and a theoretical provocation.

What would fashion studies look like if it took the knowledge embedded in unfinished things as seriously as it takes the authority of finished images?

LANGUAGE AS RESPONSIBILITY

The contributions gathered in this issue were solicited under a call that asked whether fashion needs a new language to facilitate its transition toward greater environmental and social responsibility. Having read what the submissions reveal about the gap between fashion's self-description and its material operations, about the geopolitical hierarchies that determine whose languages count, about the structural conditions that enable greenwashing to function as communication rather than deception, we are in a position to be more specific about what that question means.

Fashion does not need a new language in the sense of new terminology. The vocabulary of sustainability, circularity, responsibility, and ethical production is already extensive.

What the papers in this issue demonstrate is that the problem is not lexical but structural.

Fashion's language has become extraordinarily

adept at saying the right things while leaving the conditions that produce the wrong outcomes largely intact. It has learned to absorb critique, to translate sustainability discourse into a resource for brand differentiation, to aestheticise the evidence of its own damage, to make the acknowledgement of a problem serve as a substitute for its resolution.

What fashion studies can contribute to this situation is not more sophisticated vocabulary but more rigorous analysis. The discipline is well placed to track the gap between what fashion says and what it does, to examine how specific discursive formations function in specific contexts, how meaning is produced and stabilised, how visibility is managed and what it conceals.

To do this effectively, it needs to develop its empirical tools alongside its theoretical frameworks, to move from the identification of discourse to its systematic examination. To do so without reproducing the “western” epistemological frameworks that fashion's dominant narratives have always favoured is, as Wild argues, not merely a methodological adjustment but a reorientation of purpose, one that takes seriously what fashion's own narrative structures reveal and what they are organised to conceal (forthcoming).

This issue represents a stage in that development.

The papers gathered here approach fashion's languages from multiple disciplines and multiple locations: from linguistics and literary studies, from cultural theory and design practice, from the Global South and from the studios of European fashion education. They do not constitute a unified argument. But they share a refusal to take fashion's self-description at face value: a commitment to examining what the system says, how it says it, and what it cannot or will not say.

That refusal is, we argue, a form of responsibility.

Fashion studies' engagement with fashion's discursive practices is not merely academic.

The languages through which fashion is described shape what wearers understand, what regulators can hold to account, what producers are expected to justify, and what communities can demand.

When those languages systematically obscure the environmental costs of overproduction, or aestheticise the evidence of global inequality, or substitute the performance of ethical intent for its demonstration, the consequences are material. People and places bear those

consequences. The illegal textile dumps near Alto Hospicio, the labour conditions rendered invisible by the vocabulary of craft and heritage, the communities whose aesthetic practices are absorbed into global fashion without attribution or remuneration: these are not abstractions. They are what fashion's language, when functioning as myth, helps to make possible. The periphery of the semiosphere, as Lotman understood, is not a margin. It is a generative zone, the place where the system's contradictions become visible, where alternative sign systems come into contact with dominant ones, and where new forms of meaning have the best chance of emerging. The contributions in this issue work at precisely these edges: at the border between the centre's sustainability narrative and the Atacama Desert's reality; between the aspirational imagery of Indian fashion influencers and the material conditions their captions do not mention; between the polished coherence of MUJI's retail language and the accumulation it facilitates; between the authority of the business suit and the body it was never designed to clothe; between the finished garment and the discarded toile that contains the knowledge the finished garment conceals. To read fashion from these thresholds is to develop the literacy that the field needs, not to celebrate the margins for their own sake, but to understand what the centre depends on them to absorb.

THE CONTRIBUTIONS

The three concerns traced across this editorial — how fashion stabilises meaning, whose meaning the system recognises, and how the field might examine both more rigorously — cut across the issue's two-part structure rather than dividing neatly along it.

The first section, *Elicitation* — a term that signals the drawing-out of meanings fashion's discourse produces but rarely makes explicit — brings together papers that examine how fashion produces and circulates meaning across its dominant and emergent discursive systems. The second section, *Experience*, gathers contributions grounded in practice-led, phenomenological, or embodied approaches to fashion's languages.

Pino Ahumada's opening essay develops the concept of the semiotic threshold through the case of Chile and the Atacama Desert, arguing that the global fashion system maintains its discursive coherence by spatially displacing the instability

its operations produce. The analysis of *Atacama Fashion Week*, *RFD Tarapacá*, and *El Gigante Vestido* as creative interventions at this threshold demonstrates that peripheral territories are not merely sites of residue but also of critical semiotic activity — though that activity remains vulnerable to recentralisation through the very mediation that gives it visibility.

Borgia's study of *hardshell* and *softshell* in Italian outdoor magazine discourse examines loanword integration as a site of linguistic and commercial negotiation. Her diachronic corpus analysis documents the unstable, proliferating graphic forms through which English technical terminology enters Italian specialist vocabulary, and the inadequacy of indigenous equivalents to capture the semantic and functional specificity that makes the loanwords commercially necessary. The outdoor clothing sector proves a particularly revealing case study for the broader question of how English-language dominance shapes the vocabularies through which technical and cultural value are constructed.

The reading of *The Intuitionist* situates Barthes' theory of myth and Revolutionary speech within a literary text whose central argument is precisely about the limits of fashion's mythological system when confronted with bodies it was not designed to include. The analysis shows how fashion's most stabilised semiotic resources — the business suit as a sign of modernity, achievement, and belonging — become unstable, and politically charged, when worn by those whom the myth was produced to exclude.

Dannae Ioannou's paper on philosophical fashion campaigns examines how luxury brands (Saint Laurent's *As Time Goes By* and Gucci's *Aria*) mobilise philosophical texts as semiotic resources. Drawing on Barthes and Bourdieu, the analysis demonstrates how philosophical authority is converted into symbolic capital through processes of aestheticisation and mythologisation: Proust becomes atmosphere; Freud becomes fetish; Butler becomes performative surface. Philosophy is neither explained nor applied; it is consumed as depth, as intellectual aura, as the cultural credentials of brands that have learned to speak the language of theory while remaining immune to its critical force.

Baruah's study of Indian fashion influencers and sustainability discourse provides a systematic empirical analysis, combining semiotic theory

with a qualitative examination of forty Instagram posts. The four communicative patterns she identifies constitute a grammar of influencer-led greenwashing that is structurally embedded rather than individually deceptive.

Lo's analysis of MUJI closes the first section with an autoethnographically grounded examination of how retail minimalism manages, rather than reduces, the experience of consumption.

The paper traces the trajectory from MUJI's early positioning at the productive periphery of the fashion semiosphere to its status as an institutionalised aesthetic whose language of restraint has been absorbed into mainstream consumer culture.

The *Experience* section opens with Coats' contribution on material intelligence, which examines three design practices — Elena Velez, Craig Green, and Amber Jae Slooten/The Fabricant — as sites of what it terms counter-language: knowledge-making through making that operates at fashion's productive periphery and cannot be captured by its dominant communicative formats. The three practices are read through feminist materialism, affect theory, and posthuman critique, producing the analytical categories of collapse, ritual, and speculation as distinct epistemic orientations.

Marshall's study of the fashion toile, grounded in the ongoing practice-led project *The Draft Archive*, proposes the discarded prototype as a material and semiotic artefact with the capacity to generate new forms of fashion meaning. The toile's unfinished state, its resistance to the polished coherence that fashion's dominant language requires, becomes, in Marshall's analysis, a site of agency rather than absence: a place where value, desire, and self-representation may be renegotiated outside the system's usual terms.

The issue also includes *Mythologies* and *Lexigraphy* sections. These shorter contributions operate in a different formal register from the research essays, but they are not supplementary: they extend and, in certain respects, sharpen the issue's central arguments. The *Mythologies* contributions take their cue from Barthes' own *Mythologies* and Eco's *Travels in Hyper Reality* (1986), performing the kind of close, de-familiarising attention to individual objects and scenes that the essays often call for but necessarily work at too large a scale to enact. Maria Spadoni Battistoni's analysis of

two photographed garments printed with the word "ORIGINAL" — one of them "misspelled" as "ORIGIANL" — reads this apparently trivial instance with the care the editorial argues fashion studies needs to develop: the ideological work of a concept as fundamental as originality, traced through a single piece of fabric.

Nathan Douenburg's account of the *Bakkersbuis*, the traditional white coat of the Dutch baker, shows how craft identity and national mythology are constructed through workwear with the same semiotic machinery the essays identify operating in luxury campaigns and Instagram posts.

Maria Delifoti's "The Kimono Cover Up" examines luxury e-commerce copywriting as a site where cultural appropriation is naturalised through language, a micro-instance of the geopolitical hierarchies of naming and authority that run through several of the research essays. Esther Gutiérrez Mecías and J. Carlos García-Reyes read fast fashion and the circular economy as competing mythologies of speed and temporality, arguing that circularity functions less as structural transformation than as comforting aesthetic promise, a claim that runs in close parallel with Baruah's empirical analysis of influencer-led greenwashing, but pursued through a single sustained image rather than a corpus of posts. The *Lexigraphy* contributions work differently again: genealogically, tracing how specific words have accumulated meaning, shifted sense, or become contested over time.

Where the essays expose the gap between what fashion says and what it does, the Lexigraphies ask how that gap opens up in the first place, through the words themselves. Clizia Moradei's examination of the contested terminology of leather alternatives (faux, eco, vegan, bio) in Italian regulation and industry discourse is in direct dialogue with Baruah and with the editorial's broader concern about sustainability language that obscures rather than illuminates material reality. Shannon Leila Flaherty and Kelleher's genealogy of the word "flattering", exposing it as a covert instrument of anti-fat bias embedded in decades of popular media advice, and Karmen Samson's analysis of standardised clothing sizing as a sign system that produces social judgment rather than neutral measurement, both demonstrate that fashion's apparently technical or aesthetic vocabulary is doing the same exclusionary ideological work that the essays identify at the level of global supply

chains and semiotic hierarchies. The bodies rendered peripheral or invisible are not only those of the Global South but those that fashion's domestic language of taste and fit has never been designed to include. Further contributions examine the shifting, contested vocabularies of androgynous and gender-fluid fashion (Judith Beyer) and the historically weighted concept of "world fashion", whose implied universality conceals the same "western"-centrist assumptions that we identify as one of the field's most entrenched blind spots (Aliena Guggenberger). Together, the *Mythologies* and *Lexigraphies* are not a supplement to the essays but a demonstration of one of their core claims: that to examine fashion's language rigorously means attending to individual words, objects, and scenes with the same critical seriousness brought to institutional systems and global structures.

TOWARD AN EMPIRICAL FASHION DISCOURSE STUDIES

This issue does not resolve the question it calls posed — whether fashion needs a new language to facilitate the industry's shift towards a more environmentally friendly structure. It clarifies and intensifies it. The transition toward greater environmental responsibility, toward more equitable distributions of cultural authority, demands not only new practices but new discursive habits, and new tools for examining them. The field of fashion studies has the theoretical resources to contribute to this work.

What it needs to develop more fully are the empirical methods, the tools for systematic textual and visual analysis, the analytical frameworks for tracking how specific discursive formations function in specific contexts, the methodological vocabulary for distinguishing between claiming discourse and demonstrating it. These are not merely academic questions.

They are the conditions under which fashion studies can make claims that are answerable, and therefore, ultimately, useful.

The languages of fashion are already changing. New vocabularies are emerging at the margins: in the creative interventions staged at Atacama, in the practice-led investigations of design studios, in the analytical frameworks being developed by researchers working outside fashion's dominant cultural centres. The contributions to this issue provide an initial mapping of these peripheral

discursive spaces — from e-commerce platforms and influencer feeds to retail environments, design studios, activist interventions, and literary texts. But these are only the sites that have become visible enough to attract scholarly attention.

Fashion's discursive landscape is vast, unevenly documented, and continuously generating new formations. The product descriptions that mediate between brands and consumers across dozens of platforms and languages; the regulatory texts that will increasingly shape what fashion is permitted to claim; the vernacular exchanges through which communities outside fashion's established centres articulate their own relationships to dress, craft, and sustainability — many of these discursive territories remain unmapped.

An empirical fashion discourse studies cannot begin with a predetermined inventory of where to look. It must be prepared to discover its objects as the semiosphere shifts and generates new sites of tension, translation, and meaning.

What the contributions gathered here demonstrate, collectively, is that fashion's language is not neutral. It has a politics, a geography, and a history.

It produces some realities and conceals others.

It distributes the authority to name and withholds it. It makes certain futures imaginable and renders others, quite literally, unspeakable.

To examine that language rigorously — to hold it to account, to trace its operations, to identify what it cannot say and to ask why — is one of the most pressing tasks available to fashion studies today.

REFERENCES

- Barthes, R. (1967). *Système de la mode*. Éditions du Seuil.
- Berger, N. (2026). *Public Discourse and the Fashion Industry*. Routledge.
- Briggs, A. (2013). 'Capitalism's Favourite Child: The Production of Fashion'. In: *Fashion cultures revisited: theories, explorations and analysis*. S. Bruzzi and P. Church Gibson, Eds. Routledge. pp. 186-199.
- Eco, U. (1986). *Travels in Hyper Reality*. Harcourt.
- Kawamura, Y., (2023) *Fashion-ology: Fashion Studies in the Postmodern Digital Era*. Bloomsbury.
- Leopardi, G. (1982). *Dialogue Between Fashion and Death* (G. Cecchetti Trans.). Penguin.
- Lipovetsky, G. (1987). *L'empire de l'éphémère: La mode et son destin dans les sociétés modernes*. Gallimard.
- Lotman, Y. M. (1991). *Universe of the mind: A semiotic theory of culture* (A. Shukman, Trans.). I. B. Tauris. (Original work published 1990).
- Lyotard, J.-F. (1984). *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (G. Bennington and B. Massumi Trans.). Manchester. (Original work published 1979).
- Rocamora, A. (2002). 'Fields of Fashion: Critical Insights into Bourdieu's Sociology of Culture', *Journal of Consumer*

Culture, 2(3), pp. 341–362.

Rocamora, A. (2009). *Fashioning the City: Paris, Fashion and the Media*. London.

Wild, B.L. (2024). *Hang-ups: Reflections on the causes and consequences of fashion's 'Western'-centrism*. Bloomsbury.

Wild, B.L. (2026). *Appropriation*. Bloomsbury.

Wild, B.L., 'Fashion as narrative'. Forthcoming.