Fashion Journalism

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Introduction

What is fashion when it is considered as a field of study, or as work in the sector of journalism today?

Here, I am going to suggest some possible answers (but I also invite you to think of your own responses):

Fashion is a cultural item. As you will see in Chapters 1 and 2, fashion expresses the cultural identity of a community, a social group, or a historical period. Through the signs of fashion it is perhaps possible to glance at social changes in a better way than others. For instance, think about what was represented in favor of women’s freedom and emancipation, in the first decades of the twentieth century, by the shortening of skirts, and the disappearance of crinoline. Think about the role jeans had as a symbol of youth rebellion in the 1950s and 1970s. Think about the role played by figures like Helmut Newton and Diana Vreeland, who we will talk about in the course, and who, apart from being exponents of the world of culture in a broader sense, were a fashion photographer and the director of a fashion magazine, respectively. Therefore, fashion journalism is also a sector of cultural journalism, where culture means lifestyles, tastes, and the daily costumes of a society.

Fashion is a voice of economy. Nowadays, fashion fuels large economic interests, and is productive in both a manufacturing and financial sense. Important brands are listed on the Stock Exchange; sometimes globalization involves the fashion industry in a problematic way (delocalization, working conditions in countries where there is no acceptable work protection). Interestingly new development models are based creatively on the fashion industry and startups. The industrial revolution itself, that process of deep historical transformation in production methods, was started in the eighteenth century in British textile factories. Therefore, fashion journalism has a lot to do with the sector of economic journalism.

Fashion is a global topic. Certainly, fashion journalism, as we will see in Chapter 3, was often created for Court gossip. Even today the fashion scene is involved in show business and in areas that are regarded as frivolous. However, fashion represents a special declination of the concept of worldliness, being literally in the world. Fashion journalism might aim to catch the most profound and less ephemeral of such topics.
Actually, fashion does not limit itself to one of the above-mentioned fields (culture, economy, society), nor is it completed by the sum of the three. Fashion is a complex and autonomous system (even if relatively autonomous), which covers several aspects of society. And fashion journalism is a specialized area of journalism, which covers different discourse genres, as we will see in this course.

We will also see the many and varied professions in fashion journalism today, plus how many sectors of the information society are involved in the competencies and knowledge you will acquire. The aim of this book is to guide you through five main topics:

1. Fashion theory
2. The history of journalism and fashion news
3. The role and transformations of fashion journalism in the media today
4. Discourse and text articulation in fashion journalism
5. The values that should inspire fashion journalistic writing today

Enjoy your work
Prof. Patrizia Calefato

General learning outcomes

By studying this course you will:

- Acquire knowledge and competences in reading (interpreting and understanding) fashion phenomena.
- Be able to create your own fashion writing style.
- Be able to choose your specific discourse genre, to narrate and describe fashion.
- Acquire competences related to your visual culture, which enable you, for example, to choose pictures to accompany an article, to link words and images effectively, or to even become a fashion photojournalist.
Chapter 1: Fashion theory

Learning outcomes:

By studying this chapter, you will:

- Understand the social, cultural and communicative dimension of clothing and fashion.
- Understand the role of fashion within society and mass culture.
- Understand the relationship between fashion and the formation of personal and social identity.
- Understand the ways in which fashion relates to language, and functions as a language.

1.1 What is fashion?

She put on the wondrous robe which Minerva had worked for her with consummate art, and had embroidered with manifold devices; she fastened it about her bosom with golden clasps, and she girded herself with a girdle that had a hundred tassels: then she fastened her earrings, three brilliant pendants that glistened most beautifully, through the pierced lobes of her ears, and threw a lovely new veil over her head. She bound her sandals on to her feet.1

The above a well-known excerpt from *The Iliad*, which describes the robing of Hera. The goddess is getting her clothes, accessories, jewelry, and perfumes ready, in order to seduce Zeus, to distract him from protecting the Trojans in battle. These lines express emblematically some of the functions carried out by clothes, and the signs clothing convey among human beings, such as charm and eroticism, and identifying social and sexual roles. For example, Hera’s female glamour is counterbalanced by the exhibition of Agamemnon who is getting ready for the battle in the following lines, also taken from *The Iliad*:

First he girded his goody greaves about his legs, making them fast with ankle clasps of silver; and about his chest he set the breastplate, [...] on his head Agamemnon set a helmet, with a peak before and behind, and four plumes of horse-hair that nodded menacingly above it.2

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2 Homer, *The Iliad*, vv. 17–19; 41f.
Exercise 1
Explain what is meant by the clothed body.

Exercise 2
When can we talk about fashion as a form of communication?

Exercise 3
Describe the differences between dress and dressing, according to Roland Barthes.

Exercise 4
Describe the relationship between fashion and identity.

Exercise 5
Look for some examples of interaction between verbal language and clothes within the fashions of the past fifty years.
Chapter 2: 
Historical aspects of fashion journalism

Learning outcomes:

By studying this chapter you will:

- Understand the historical roots of the birth and diffusion of fashion journalism, and magazines.
- Understand the role of some personalities of fashion journalism and literature, between the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries.
- Understand the historical and social function of fashion journalism.
- Understand the basic elements of the relationship between fashion journalism and art, photography, radio, television, and cinema.

2.1 Origins of fashion journalism

The French magazine *Mercure Galant* is considered to be the first periodical on fashion. It was published in Paris from 1672 to 1724 (in 1678, it changed its name to *Mercure de France*), and collected articles related to literature, poetry, philosophy, accounts on social events, and also fashion. This kind of publication was an evolution of literary journals, and hosted a genre which was called ‘gallant.’ In the Enlightened France, the philosophers despised this kind of publication since they considered it ‘low,’ and far from the literary and philosophical publications in which they were involved. This debate was connected directly to the philosophical debate on luxury, which involved intellectuals such as Montesquieu, Diderot, and Condillac in the early eighteenth century. Yet, fashion and luxury weren’t always opposed by intellectuals: for example, luxury was given an entry in the *Encyclopédie* attributed to Jean-François de Saint Lambert. And in order to prove the usefulness of luxury, the Dutch doctor and philosopher, Bernard de Mandeville, wrote the popular *Fable of the Bees*, at the beginning of the century.

The first fashion magazines started to become more widespread around 1750. Before then, information related to clothing had been expressed in different ways than writing. Since the Renaissance, there were observers
Chapter 3: Fashion journalism today

Learning outcomes:

After studying this chapter you will:

- Understand the modern role of fashion magazines, and of articles dedicated to fashion in periodicals.
- Understand the function of web journalism within the sector of fashion information.
- Understand how the transformations of TV changed communication and news about fashion.
- Understand the variety of professions in fashion journalism today.

3.1 Fashion magazines, and fashion articles in daily newspapers and periodicals

In this century, fashion journalism can be considered to be a fully recognized genre, both within the journalistic profession, and within society. Journalists and well-known magazine editors are sought after by fashion brands as potential popularizers of their own philosophy to a wider audience. In the same way as topics such as sport, show business, economics, and tourism, fashion is part of the news, and specialized articles, in both daily newspapers and magazines on current affairs. The editorial staff of the most important fashion magazines have an unwavering power to approve, or disapprove high-couture and prêt-a-porter collections, and often influence choice.

You might remember the movie The Devil Wears Prada (2006), where today’s fashion journalism is ironically, but ruthlessly, represented through the story of a young intern in the biggest fashion magazine based in New York (Runway, a clear disguise for Vogue). The movie is based on the autobiographical book of the same name by Lauren Weisberger, but it is even more effective in representing, above all, the character of the magazine’s director, Miranda, inspired partly by Anna Wintour, director of Vogue America, and partly by Diana Vreeland.
Chapter 4
Genres and texts in fashion journalism

Learning outcomes:

By studying this chapter you will:
- Understand what is meant, from the linguistic point of view, by discourse genre and text.
- Understand features and techniques of some genres of discourse to be implemented in fashion communication: description, short story, and interview.
- Understand how best to articulate the relationship between photography and writing.

4.1 What are discourse genres?

We will start with a few hints on discourse linguistics, which are hopefully useful hints, and not too boring, in order to understand where, and how, the job of the fashion journalist is carried out, which is a real linguistic job. It is clearly with words that the journalist is most concerned: to write, read, speak, or listen to. Words make up speech. And speech, in its turn, is articulated into utterances; that is, into acts whereby the person speaking, or writing, takes the floor and takes a stance within the context where the discourse is produced. In other words, they take a stance in relation to others, to the world. Utterances become real through verbal statements which make sense, and which we can consider as minimum units of communication. Therefore, the utterance establishes the social dimension of language, since in order for it to be produced, it presumes the existence of at least a speaker and a listener; that is, a social relation made up of at least two sides.

Discourse genres are the model structures of utterances: forms of relatively fixed utterances, where the wide variety of statements, which are made available by language, makes it possible not to repeat the same utterances. Conversation, dialogue, monologue, letters, the direct reply, and indirect speech, are all examples of simple, also called primary discourse genres. Furthermore, there are more complex genre discourses, or secondary
Chapter 5

Five values for fashion journalism
(following Italo Calvino)

Learning outcomes:

By studying this chapter you will:

- Understand some of the linguistic transformations that have occurred in the writing and reading practices of our age.
- Understand some of the values which should inspire fashion journalism today.

5.1 Metamorphosis of writing

In our age, forms of writing are becoming more numerous and more complex, both in our daily lives, and in the professional sector. In the face of those who maintained that, with the advent of new technologies, we would lose the ability to handle words made possible by writing with a pen, today we have endless possibilities for writing (and reading). The hand is not only used for handwriting, but also types on a keyboard, moves a mouse, gently moves the touchpad, touches a tablet screen with fingertips in order to select, expand, and browse through electronic pages, and taps the display of an e-book reader, or a Smartphone. The hand is accompanied by a voice that can order a computer to do certain tasks. The hand is also accompanied by sight, through which we read, not only alphabetic sequences, but increasingly also visual sequences.

In the 1980s—long before the IT and digital revolution of the language—the Italian writer Italo Calvino (1923–1985) defined some of the values writing should preserve in the current century. In Six Memos for the next Millennium (1988), based on the lectures he would have held in Harvard, but that he was unable to give due to his sudden death, Calvino introduced five keywords for writing: lightness; quickness; exactitude; visibility; and multiplicity. I recommend you to use them as a guide for your writing. Indeed, I am sure that they directly and almost prophetically refer to some of the necessary skills and competences for writing about fashion, having the current technology at your fingertips.
Exercise 18

Exactitude: precision, clarity, selection of the recipients, wondering: 'What do I want to say?' 'To whom am I saying it?' 'Am I being honest, when I write?'

Exercise 19

The foulard.

On Susan Sarandon’s head as the character of Louise, while she gets ready for her journey with Thelma, the foulard (headscarf) made a small comeback. Perhaps because its modernity has always been understood, or perhaps because American women have never really stopped wearing it, the image of Louise with her high chignon held in a square of soft material makes us think back over the history of this object in the imagery of twentieth-century fashion. The word ‘foulard’ originally referred to a typical way of working silk. Its meaning was later extended to describe a square (approx. 90cm by 90cm) of the same fabric, printed with various colors and designs. The foulard is a typical female garment, whose practical use (protecting from the cold or wind, or covering a décolleté) is of secondary importance compared to its being a symbol of style. You either love it or you hate it; there is no in-between.

Bibliography


**About the author**

**Patrizia Calefato** is Associate Professor at Università degli studi di Bari “Aldo Moro”, Italy. She is also Affiliated Professor at the Center for Fashion Studies, Stockholm University, Sweden.

Her recent research covers subjects such as the signs of luxury, lifestyles and excess in the contemporary age; the relationships between fashion and time; *écriture* and the new media.

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