

INTRODUCTION

“The readers of a newspaper, magazine, or book are the people who read it.”¹

If *scanning* through a magazine is a fast and superficial mode, and *paging* is about turning the glossy paper pages, would *browsing* be the word for a casual way of looking through it, without a specific purpose? And if *looking or flicking* through a magazine depicts a focus on the visual can we then say that *reading* is about the words? If so, then how often do we actually read a magazine and how exactly do we read it?

When we think of text in fashion we probably think of reports of fashion shows or interviews with designers - describing the designers' biography, motivation or the focus of a certain collection. However, in fashion magazines there is another type of text that is often overlooked but essential in the construct of fashion. It is in titles, introductions and captions found in the editorials, advertorials and trend pages: a form of text that has its own syntax and vocabulary forming a specific type of fashion language that does not report or reflect, but transcends the materiality of the garment; text that produces value. This is language as 'material'; where streetwear “*feels like energy*”², ‘Chopard is “*the artisan of emotions*”³ and “*trophy knits warm you heart*”⁴. It is a language that creates fashion.

Text in fashion has always been subordinate to the image. In *The Fashion System* Roland Barthes writes: “The

¹
Reader. (n.d.). In: *Collins Dictionary* [online] Collins. Available at: <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/reader> [Accessed 29 Apr. 2019].

²
Vogue UK, November 2018. London: Condé Nast, p. 28.

³
Ibid., p. 55.

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Ibid., p. 63.

seduction by the fashion image is immediate (at first sight) whereas the texts of fashion must be read word-for-word.”⁵ Images are just better aligned to a world that revolves around a continuous search for the new, one in which products, lifestyles and experiences are constantly and rapidly superseded. Although text is slower and, in a way, secondary, it is the description of a garment that has great influence on the way we perceive it, the way we value it, whether it is experienced as *cool*, *casual*, *masculine* or *magic*.

Despite being secondary to the image in many ways, it is in text that we can think about fashion beyond garments. It is a dimension in which we can capture information beyond the materiality of the real garment. From Barthes' perspective we can begin to see text as a versatile and highly influential structure. He explains that first of all, text is free from practicalities and plasticity: “only written clothing has no practical or aesthetic function”⁶ (while garments and images do have this) and it can therefore easily create and circulate meaning. Secondly, he writes that text can transmit information that is not evident in the image or garment itself. Through its existence in a dimension beyond the garment, text can generate stories and ‘new worlds’ around the garment.

It is this unrestrained position of text that invites a poetic approach towards fashion in the content as well as in the forms these texts take. Throughout history fashion texts have increasingly addressed our emotions and experiences, instead of just pointing out the materiality, construction or practicalities of the garment. In terms of content, if we look at captions today, garments are often described from the perspective of emotional experiences: streetwear that “*feels like energy*”⁷. We also see stories,

⁵ Barthes, R. (1967). *The Fashion System*. Berkeley: University of California Press. p. 4.

⁶ Ibid.

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⁷ Vogue UK
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creating engaging narratives around the garment and the persona wearing it. Formally these fashion texts have their own distinct style of syntax, grammar and vocabulary, one that sometimes transcends our day-to-day language or the general correctness and logic of grammar. Due to its complex syntax full of alliterations and hyperbole, this is language that seems to be written to be read quietly, not to be spoken out loud. "*Supersized, sequinstrewn or simply smile-inducing – who could resist Calvin Klein's Road Runner Style?*"⁸ These phrases are collections of words that speak to our imagination, a form of suggestive poetry rather than facts or rational arguments in a logical order.

However poetic and potent the texts are, the writer of these short storylines and captions remains anonymous, unlike the names of the photographer, the stylist and the make-up and hair artist who always accompany the image in fashion editorials. In fashion, photographers are superstars but writers of a large proportion of text in magazines are not mentioned, they are invisible. The non-existent writer can affect the reader and their interpretation of the text in two ways. Not being attributed to a particular author enhances the idea that a text is not just one person's opinion but that these words exist independently as a sort of universal truth; part of the system of mystification and alienation in fashion. Together with the form and content of the fashion texts, their anonymity contributes to a complex strategy that ultimately blurs and hides the reality of fashion.

Conversely, text without an author can restore the status of the reader and open up the potential for reinterpretation. As Barthes claimed "we know that to restore to writing its future, we must reverse its myth: the birth of the reader must be ransomed by the death

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Vogue UK, November 2018. London: Condé Nast, p. 28.

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Vogue UK, November 2018. London: Condé Nast.

of the Author.”⁹ This argument suggests that omitting the author, in whatever way, can be empowering for the reader, enabling multiple ‘readings’ and therefore meanings of the text to emerge instead of reliance on the singular legitimatisation by the author. Thus, the void left by a non-existent writer in the fashion magazine leaves space for the reader to creatively and critically explore the plurality of fashion.

Undeniably text is a material with which to create fashion and by extension a form of cultural production. But what type of value, with which goal and thus what kind of culture are we creating? However captivating and poetic these captions are, we should not forget that this type of value production strongly determines our relationship with garments, identity, body and thus subsequently our role as consumers. As an ultimate tool and strategy of abstraction, these fashion texts are creative and damaging at the same time. Creating ‘new worlds’ in which the garments are subservient to emotions, feelings, experiences, stories and identity, they hide production processes and other realities of fashion.

Text is implemented primarily as a tool to create desire and enhance consumption. However, there is the potential for text, counter to fast and ‘easy’ imagery, to play a role in slowing down our frenzied consumption: reading word by word as a reaction to fast fashion. As implied before, with many of the magazine texts rendered authorless, the reader can take on a new and subversive role. Just as the wearer of a garment has agency in creating fashion so the reader of a magazine can become aware of his or her role as a contributor to fashion. Perhaps this shift in the positioning and vocabulary in and around fashion might lead to a change in our values. To this end, *A Magazine Reader* is an exercise in actively *reading* the magazine.

⁹ Barthes, R. (1978). *Death of the Author*. In *Image – Music – Text*. New York: Hill and Wang.

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For this issue we have focused on reading each and every word. This process of dissecting and analysing reveals the *actual* structure and content of the magazine. (Which words are used? Is it readable at all? Is the meaning clear? Which values are given precedence? Which brands are represented? What are the topics covered (or left out)? How are they ordered in the magazine? Where are the page numbers?) Most importantly it uncovers opportunities for the redefinition and reimagination of these texts and their intentions. Each contribution to this edition of *A Magazine Reader* takes on a slightly different reader perspective, unravelling a particular aspect of embedded meaning and value and reframing it in a broader social and cultural context. Together they remind us that becoming aware of our position as readers means we become aware of our position to shape and create fashion.

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