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Italian Fashion in the Latest Decades: From Its Original Features to the “New Vocabulary”

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ABSTRACT | *“Made in Italy” is an indication of origin, recorded and rooted in history, society, and the imaginary world; it is a “half-brand” that, in the latest years of the twentieth century, aimed at characterizing Italian products and its tradition in a clear way. This article aims at pinpointing some elements of fashion theory with reference to Italy. After outlining certain historical original traits of the Italian style, I will point out the characteristics of the two “long waves” of the Made in Italy brand: the first one that dates from the Sixties to the Eighties, and the second one from the late Nineties to the present.*

KEYWORDS | *fashion, Italy, fashion theory, globalization, sustainability, luxury, critical fashion*

From November 2015 to March 2016, the Triennale di Milano¹ hosted an important exhibition entitled “The new vocabulary of Italian fashion.”² Dedicated to Elio Fiorucci, over one hundred fashion designers and brands were exhibited, together with countless new fashion communication entities, from magazines to blogs. The exhibition aimed at reviewing the state of what is known as contemporary Made in Italy, from 1998 until now, starting out from eight basic keywords: matter, surface, archetypes, detail, ornament, construction, uniforms, and workshop. These were intended as concepts to characterize the totality of the Made in Italy rubric. Today, as well as yesterday, Made in Italy is an indication of origin, recorded and rooted in history, society, and the imaginary world; it is a “meta-brand” that, in the latest years of the twentieth century, sought to characterize clearly Italian products and their tradition. Yet Made in Italy not only refers to the economy and goods, it also encompasses a broader idea of what is done,

created, and designed in Italy, in a more diffused and transsectorial manner. We could also use the expression “Italian style,” or simply “Italy” as a metonym. Today these expressions remind us of values, stories, new identities open to comparison across the globe. This article aims at pinpointing some elements of fashion theory with reference to Italy. After outlining certain historical, original traits of the Italian style, I will point out the characteristics of the two “long waves” of the Made in Italy brand: the first one that dates from the Sixties to the Eighties, and the second one from the late Nineties until today.

Italy and Fashion: Original Features

The time when Italy began as a nation state, also known as the Risorgimento years from the post-Napoleonic period to the year 1861, saw a deep transformation in the national consciousness, geographical configuration, power relations, and international relations. Aesthetic models also changed, and in a profound way. It was during this period that tailors, artisans, and intellectuals sought out the notion of an “Italian style,” which would consist of quality craftsmanship, refinement of design, and optimal materials. It was an idea that found their paragons in the great Renaissance masters such as Raphael, Piero della Francesca, Botticelli, and Leonardo. Added to this was the paradigm of the courtier as defined by Baldassar Castiglione in his sixteenth-century book as the one who spontaneously vaunts elegance and luxury.³ The sprezzatura, which characterizes this political and aesthetic figure, continues to underpin the idea of “Italian-ness” in fashion and style.⁴

In the first decades of the nineteenth century, Italian fashions had been influenced by the Parisian Romantic and aristocratic styles, and inspired by the cultural atmosphere following the Congress of Vienna (1815). It was only after around 1830 that the influence of the bourgeois taste in fashion increased: fashions no longer came from courts but were shaped and exchanged during cultural gatherings, in literary cafés, in city streets that were increasingly becoming places of exchange for new ideas and new conceptions of lifestyle and identity. In Milan, a short time before revolutionary upheavals of the year 1948, the idea of “Italian-style clothing” was suggested: *Corriere delle dame* (a popular fashion magazine at that time) proposed a simple, non-tightly fitted jacket for males, and dresses buttoned up at the

front and without crinoline for females. The patriots of the Risorgimento depicted Italy allegorically as a woman dressed with a dress tight around the chest, tied up at the front, together with a petticoat in satin or wool, and a felt hat with feathers. A symbolic “Italy” with the flag appeared in a popular sketch that might be portraying Cristina Belgioioso Trivulzio, the patriot who, together with 200 volunteers from Naples, rushed to Milan during the famous “Five-Day Uprising” (1848). Italian female beauty was thus developed in literature and art in the climate of the Italian Unification as a rhetorical device with strong communicative power and as the aesthetic foundation of the Italian nation state.

In Luchino Visconti’s film *Il Gattopardo* (The Leopard) (1963), inspired by the eponymous novel by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa and set in Sicily in 1860, it is clothing dress that becomes the repository of deeper meanings, both in terms of the internal understanding of the story, and the historical changes relating to social mobility of that period. The dazzling white dress worn by Angelica (Claudia Cardinale), the beautiful parvenu at the ball in the sumptuous Ponteleone Palace in Palermo, is a resounding foil to the precious but drab fabrics of old aristocratic women. As such, the fashion of the new social classes highlighted every aspect that had replaced symbols of the old regime in terms of the economic and political hierarchies of a newly united Italy.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the big names of Italian fashion were Rosa Genoni, Mariano Fortuny, and Elsa Schiaparelli. In their respective ways, these three figures laid the foundation of Italian fashion. Fashion was deeply connected to values, namely tradition (Genoni), technology (Fortuny), and experimentation with forms and concepts (Schiaparelli). During these years, the historical avant-garde movements of the early twentieth century, especially Futurism, sensed the connection between art and life. For them, especially the likes of Giacomo Balla, Fortunato Depero, and Thayath, fashion was a space where one could express dynamism, functionality, and where one could project toward the worldly din of mass society. At this time “Italian fashion” meant a type of fashion freed from Paris and London influence, albeit not immune to the international fashion system—as the authors of the new “national” style well understood themselves. Among them also emerged the controversial author and personality of Gabriele D’Annunzio, who can be considered the inventor of “fashion” writing as a literary genre in Italian letters.

However, during the fascist era of 1924 to 1943, the regime imposed an autocratic (self-sufficient) style, inspired by a so-called “Italianness” without comparisons, with the image of a woman as a mother and emphatically not “man-like” (that is, as opposed to the new-fangled flapper), and the image of a new “manly” man (as opposed to the historical dandy). During the post-war period, it was the cinema that created conditions for a rebirth of Italian fashion, a medium popular and pervasive enough to do so. Hollywood discovered Salvatore Ferragamo and the Fontana sisters; likewise, the lace worn by Linda Christian at her wedding with Tyrone Power, the “priest-like” dress by Ava Gardner inspired by the religious uniform, and Audrey Hepburn’s court shoes became known to the world. In 1951, the first fashion parade organized by Giovanni Battista Giorgini took place in Florence, marking the real beginning of Italian fashion, with the ritual gathering in the famous *Sala bianca* (White hall) of the Pitti Palace.

The First “Long Wave”: The Optimalization of One’s Will

In a nutshell, fashion is the mirror and at the same time, the model, of a society going through transformation: it anticipates upcoming times and places, but it is also embedded with the memory of past times and places. Through the fashion lens when trained across the second half of the twentieth century until today, Italian history and society reveals two “long waves.” The first one started in the early Fifties from what was defined as Italian style worldwide and then passed by the conceptual era in the early Sixties, crossed the anti-fashion of the early Seventies and the invention of prêt-à-porter (ready-to-wear). It then became complete during the great season of Italian fashion between the Seventies and Eighties. In this last decade, the Made in Italy became synonymous with a generation of great fashion stylists, with phenomena such as Milan turning into the capital of fashion, and with the birth of stereotypes such as that of a female body based on top-models, which became the new icons of imagination. As it so often happens, the social and cultural phenomenon’s peak moment of splendor is the moment that has the seeds of its own crisis and decline. And this is what happened in Italian fashion during the final fifteen years of the last century. The splendor of the so-called *Milano da bere*⁵ (Milan for drinking purposes) slowly turned into decadent clichés, while new capital cities, new experiments, and new projects became visible elsewhere and

gave life to a growing fashion polycentrism, which had the effect of eclipsing the hitherto successful Italian fashion industry.

In spite of that, the energies of Italian design tradition were not only lost, they also multiplied through new generations, in a less visible and less spectacular way compared to the previous period, and certainly more exposed to economic problems, which culminated with the 2008 financial crisis. Based on these problematic foundations, a second wave rose, starting from the turn of the century, and which continues to be in progress. Although these waves differ from each other, they share some identifiable common traits.

The strong mark of the first “wave” was a sense of optimism. It was a positivity that permeated numerous aspects of Italian social life and was rooted, as a real “optimism of the will,” in the postwar reconstruction of the country and its identity. The construction of an image of Italy through fashion was, in this sense, very similar to the linguistic unification process that was taking place on television and schools at the same time.⁶ This optimism was also intensely characterized by implied criticism, by a cultural self-consciousness, which the cinema and literature of the Fifties and Sixties expressed with considerable accomplishment. The economic boom, the so-called *dolce vita*, the technological primate, a reassuring future, and the neo-capitalist modernization of the country were the leitmotif of this optimism, and also what then triggered its critical dismantling.

The Sixties fully and symbolically showed this tension, which was well interpreted by fashion. On one hand, in that decade Italian style was widespread, heir of the great postwar tailors, while on the other hand, stylistic experimentation was rife, connected to subcultural street habits and ways. It is during these years that, in the history of clothing and style, an important step was made from tailored creations. The middle classes had access to the serial and mass consumption of clothes, thanks to prêt-à-porter fashion, department stores, and the availability of garments in multiple sizes. The decade of the Sixties was that of Capri and Cortina,⁷ of the *Bel Paese* (in English “beautiful country,” a nickname used to refer to Italy) as a place of tourism and sophistication, of knee-high trousers and bikinis.⁸ However, the second half of the decade was mainly marked by the revolution of “costumes,” a term intended in its fullest and broadest meaning. The new generations, the street uniforms, the opposition against the bourgeois lifestyle inspired fashion. Thus, as in other countries, there began in Italy a process

of spreading fashion marks “from the sidewalk to the runway,” which replaced the traditional trickle-down process. Fashion was fully presented as a “mass fashion,”⁹ encompassing social meanings, tensions, and values that go well beyond clothing. The language of art, photography, cinema, music, television, and advertisement became indispensable for fashion, which, in turn, drew its lifeblood from them.

Mass Fashion

The connection between fashion and other communicative systems has always been present: simply think about the role played in fashion by sketches and then by photography, starting from the nineteenth century. Or think about the role played by magazines, by the art of the early twentieth century avant-garde movements, or the essential synergy of fashion with cinema ever since its origin. In the second half of the twentieth century, the connection was reinforced, amplified, as well as consciously experienced within the social context. For instance, fashion photographers do not always work only with fashion; they become prescient witnesses of fashion as a daily experience. With respect to this, in the film *Blow Up* (1966) by Michelangelo Antonioni, the protagonist, Thomas, a photographer of glamorous fashion and of life at the same time, portrays the model Veruschka in his studio, but he also goes to dormitories inhabited by homeless people and to the streets of popular London neighborhoods in order to record reality.

The tight connection between music cultures, subcultural styles, and fashions changed the perception of fashion in daily life. Miniskirts, jeans, and casual clothes became, at the same time, the symbol of an era, as well as of the “timeless” features of culture and imagination. At that time—the late Sixties and early Seventies—it was an unusual event, which was of course not confined to Italy. It was rather a clear effect of the “Americanism” that Antonio Gramsci had spotted out as inscribing both mass culture and common sense. Yet, in Italy this phenomenon took a peculiar turn because it entered a background type of “humanism,” which already mingled with the history of costume and elegance and became separate from craftsmanship, figurative arts, photography, cinema, and design. Elio Fiorucci is considered the exemplary figure of this aesthetic, social, and cultural process.¹⁰

The lucky generation of Italian fashion designers who made the golden era of fashion between the Seventies and Eighties was therefore the result

of a complex national history comprising of the culture of progress, attention to materials, conceptual and manual dexterity, and fluid communication. Success in and out of that generation was based on a mature type of optimism that let fashion become the leading voice of Italian economy, the feather in the cap and the propelling push for the economic and cultural transformation of the country. Clearly this did not only include the glamorous designers to whom Andy Warhol dedicated his repeated portraits. Warhol's choices were perhaps made with the desire to show how the fashion system makes the harsh mechanism of modernity holy, thus making it much harder to distinguish the value and the perception between the work of art and the image of consumption. There was a wide texture of production, knowledge, ideas, and people, which has made its permanent mark on both recent Italian history and in its fashion.

Then came the crisis, at a time when the Italian fashion industry had clearly spent more in public relations than in research; when young people emigrated abroad; when new, more innovative and dynamic capital cities in the world started to emerge; when the model of the Italian prêt-à-porter was overcome by other forms of production and consumption; and when luxury was concentrated in supranational poles. However in Italy no one ever turned away from creating fashion, discussing fashion, or of questioning the association of the country to the culture of fashion. Paradoxically, the time when the sector saw a production crisis, between the late Nineties and the beginning of the new century, coincided with the birth of a form of cultural attention. This form of attention was no longer within an elite niche but was addressed to fashion studies in several disciplinary areas, which brought about a multiplication of publications, conferences, and exhibitions dedicated to fashion. New graduate courses, master's courses, and state and private specialization schools were founded, schools that dealt with "making fashion" and "thinking fashion," something that had been happening for a long time in other countries but was especially relevant for Italy. For it effectively turned the country into a high-profile attraction for young people studying fashion from everywhere in the world; this phenomenon continues to grow exponentially.

In this way, in Italy the widespread theoretical awareness of how aesthetic forms are relevant to our daily life expanded. Fashion, advertisements, television, cinema, the visual imaginary in its entirety, are systems of sense, and of senses intended in all their fullness and in their bodily

dimension, producing social discourses, behaviors, values, and lifestyles. Fashion works as an emblematic system, sometimes a modeling system (that is, fashioning, making, shaping aesthetic forms, attitudes, and modes of conduct), and it is often the access key to prompt important questions and to make us think about our present.

The international political crisis that spread on September 11, 2001, can be considered to be a symbolic divide line between fashion and history. This connection does not relate to fashion history as much as to the historical importance of fashion itself, and its capacity to build the experience of bodies in the world. The economic and cultural relations between the global and the local, the new role played by emerging countries as consumers and producers, the new forms and the new means of planetary communication, set fashion up in a different way compared to that of past decades.

Nowadays, What Does It Mean to Talk about Italian Fashion?

A central problem for Italian fashion has been that of production outsourcing: it was and still is related to the fate of the Made in Italy, not only from an economic and production perspective, but also from a political and cultural one. In the Nineties to early 2000s, many companies of the textile-clothing and footwear sector moved their manufacture points to places of the world where human labor, taxation, and bureaucracy were less onerous than in Italy: Eastern Europe, Turkey, China, India, and Bangladesh. This was an unavoidable process endemic of neo-liberalism, which is certainly does not confined to Italy. But particularly for Italy, it was a symbolic encumbrance since it threatened the prestige as well as the traditions in which Made in Italy is steeped. Added to this, in that same period the crisis also hit within historical areas of typical Italian production, such as Biella, Prato. After that, the financial crisis of 2008 hit the country's north. Moreover, the ready-made fashion as a new fashion production system and the large multinational low-cost chains made Italian fashion face a deep crisis, and at the same time, a number of challenges to tackle with an innovative spirit, knowledge, and continuity of tradition.

The new century opened with new situations that redefined fashion as a global system. For example, the appearance of new economic centers of gravity (China, India) and new European fashion capitals such as Antwerp, meant that fashion was something of both a life project and lifestyle. There

was also the emergence of new markets and ideas in societies that were mistakenly believed to have next to no fashion culture, such as Brazil and some African countries. Add to this the crucial role of new media in every sector, especially in fashion, which had always needed other means of mass communication in order to convey itself beyond its physical, material base. These considerations are all mitigating factors in the rejuvenated concept of Made in Italy, which actually faces them prudently and with confidence. Despite substantial outsourcing, a “hardcore” area of production in Italy has been kept stable, with a variety of workshops, a strong tradition of craftsmanship and knowledge, especially with respect to materials and manufacturing.

This productive and cultural texture has stood its ground, even in the toughest years of the international financial and economic recession. Nowadays, together with the changes and new economic and logistical consolidations over the last fifteen years, there has come to be a newly defined Made in Italy concept based on two fundamental values that replace the optimism of the preceding wave: technologies and sustainability.

The New Wave

The first aspect, technology, entails a full reconsideration of an issue that has long been of crucial importance to the Italian tradition, and is something relaunched in the Internet era, namely the construction of fashion through other media for the purpose of dissemination and communication. Communicating fashion is not new; indeed, it has a relatively long discursive lineage. From an Italian perspective, we owe the first definition of what we mean by fashion in the modern era to Cesare Vecellio—written in the distant sixteenth century—as *la cosa de gli habiti* (the thing about clothes). Vecellio used drawings of clothes *degli antichi e dei moderni* (of ancient and modern people), which he described with words.¹¹ Drawings, sketches, and later photographs, cinema, and other audiovisual media, including current convergent media transmitted by the Internet, are an integral part of fashion. The new Made in Italy is strongly focused on digital platforms, communicating fashion through technological channels, giving design concepts a deeper meaning that goes well beyond communicative functionality, to embrace design experience, knowledge, and cultural resonance. Technology is sustainable, and is something to which almost everyone is responsive.

Fashion has a twofold nature: on the one hand, it marks the contact areas between the clothes and the body, activating the senses; on the other hand, it places the individual's body within the social body, it institutionalizes human sense and drives common sense according to "average" taste and sensibility. It is also true that this prevailing common sense is often what we know today as the "stop-and-go" caused by the limited availability of money to consume clothing and accessories, which has ushered in the idea of low cost clothes, which is categorized with discount travel and furniture. Parallel to this idea, what has also increased is a common wish for more security through commodity consumption, connected to forms of "frivolous" consumption like a dress or a pair of shoes. One wholly Italian idea is ripening, that of the idea of accessible but not ephemeral luxury, but one based precisely on the quality and the life span of the garment or accessory. This movement is the opposite, but nonetheless the complement, of what we could define with neologisms like the "H&Mization" or "IKEAization" of daily consumption. Such economical reorientations are certainly based on a democratic concept of style and design, as well as on a globalized organization of work that aims at producing objects, goods, or services when there is a demand, often, however, without consideration about the how, where, and what of the conditions under which things are produced, and what is produced.

In recent years, a different meaning of the concept of "distinction" has gained ground, intended not as luxury or privilege, nor as occasional whim, but as trying to adapt the garment or the object to the most personal and intimate configuration of the idea of one's own body and well-being, of a deep and harmonic relation between the garment and human senses. From global standardization to individual personalization, this is the path along which the Made in Italy is moving. Fashion means differentiation, not homogenization, and it is based as much as possible on personal wishes, attitudes, and tastes, rather than on the imitation of the social group or of the leading elite. The relation with time established by fashion is particularly interesting, for as we can see nowadays, it focuses on practices such as recycling, redeploying, quoting, and reelaborating objects, materials, and clothes. Throughout the years of the boom, the prevailing tendency was to throw away disposable objects, clothes and accessories included, long before their functional use was exhausted but as soon as they looked obsolescent in their appearance. Yet, in the present time, the symbolic redemption

of the so-called “lost object” is comprehensively retrieved.¹² The “ruin” and its imaginary, archetypically guarded by Italy, produces new compositions starting from residual senses to be obtained in “found objects”—be they leftovers, clippings, or real waste. The complex link with time that fashion introduces through these strategies allows one to subtract objects from the poor, technical, and immediately consumable language of use and returns to them a new aura.

Within the inner nature of the Italian culture of fashion, as in design culture, there is, though often unconsciously, an innate tendency to a physical and symbolic safeguarding of the past, of worn out and never entirely abandoned objects. This Italian feature is rooted in the symbolic role of “ruins,” starting from archaeological ruins, which the Bel Paese guards. The philosophical and aesthetic concept of “ruins” was expressed by Walter Benjamin, who compared ruins to allegory: “Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things,”¹³ he writes in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. If baroque allegory showed, according to Benjamin, the *facies hippocratica* of history as a “petrified, primordial landscape,”¹⁴ in the modern era, allegories “stand for that which the commodity makes of the experiences people have in this century,”¹⁵ and at the same time they dispel “the illusion that proceeds from all ‘given order,’ whether of art or of life.”¹⁶ Giving life back to ruins, to waste, to marks worn of goods, would then allow one to perhaps invert the process of idolizing the goods themselves. It gives body and “humanity” to things and to our relationship with them.

Reusing, Ethics, Technology

Time lives by means of fashion through permanent quotations. Sometimes we are able to recognize them; at other times we are unable to grasp their origins, yet at the same time the past looms up as something familiar, which may either reassure us or upset us because it comes to us with unpredictable combinations. Here, we will consider some exemplary cases that certainly do not fully represent the Italian scenario but can still reveal how, in the country of the legendary Italian style, the way is ever more clearly and consciously paved to a special way of following, or inventing, fashion, or resorting to low-cost solutions on the one hand, and to recycling signs and objects on the other.

Ever since its foundation in 2008, the Italian brand Relight-Up has proposed a relighting project, which, as its name suggests, is to ignite people's awareness on energy sources, materials, and lifestyles. Organic cotton, algae, corn, and soy are the materials with which they manufacture sustainable fabrics for their T-shirts and sweatshirts. The idea of a limited edition is therefore "smuggled" by the luxury philosophy and used within the context of a casual style, which does not leave a choice on how to get dressed to fate, but rather advocates for greater awareness as to what one chooses to wear.

This reflection on awareness today is also extended to the concept of brand: Serpica Naro is the name of a nonexistent Anglo-Japanese fashion designer whose challenging creations were shown by a group of young fashion casual workers in a parade in 2005 in Milan during fashion week. Nowadays, this collective name under which young creative minds are collaborating operates as a "meta-brand," that is, as an open brand, which is regulated according to usual "copyleft" licenses in order to give space to individuals or groups who want to launch sustainable fashion ideas and projects.

*Rifiuto Con Affetto*¹⁷ (to refuse with affection) was a project conceived by a group of art and design students, adopted since 2007 by the public company of waste management of the Municipality of Venice. The initiative consisted in placing waste bins endowed with shelves in the streets and a wall of transparent glass, where citizens could leave objects, mainly garments, that they had abandoned, objects that could still be useful or desirable for others. Indeed, whoever wished could choose by looking through the glass and pick whatever he or she needed. The transaction was a kind of indirect barter, an invitation to follow forms of conscious consumption, but also to cultivate a sense of the care of objects. And notably, before being left in the waste bin, each old garment had to be washed, ironed, and folded, in order to have a respectable appearance in the street glass.

Remaking and reelaborating are also issues that are theoretically fascinating, especially when that intelligence and capacity of the object is used to think of the garment in such a way that it becomes like the apotheosis of its era, the elixir of the present, and therefore something still able to be appreciated. This is the case for the accessories created by the brand Luisa Cevese Riedizioni, whose foundation principles are the awareness that the textile industry, and plastic, produce a huge amount of waste, and if re-used, not only do they give life to new objects, but certain qualities can also

be explicitly highlighted through essential forms and transparent design structures. Thus, pieces of damaged fabrics, discarded threads, unfinished clothes, natural and artificial fibers, and fur hairs, remade together with plastic of any kind—hard, soft, thin, recycled or not—give life to bags, suitcases, purses, pen boxes, cushions, doormats, each piece unique in itself, though modeled into rigorously geometrical shapes. The interesting thing is the visibility, the transparency, in the literal as well as in the conceptual sense, of the reusing and juxtaposition process of materials: a transparency that could be defined, paraphrasing an expression borrowed from the cinema, as “unnatural alternated editing.”

The recycling and reusing techniques find in fashion an undoubted stronghold because in this sector the experimental force and possible amount of “surrealism”—intended as aesthetic “opposition” strategy where new styles can be practiced—is greater. In this respect, creativity and industrial production do not always go hand-in-hand. On such occasions, artists and fashion designers must deal with a good amount of provocative and irreverent art, a Situationism of sorts, as evidenced by the work of several Italian fashion artist-designers who use recycling, inspiring themselves to survival strategies of the new metropolitan nomads, from homeless people to migrants.

The brand Momaboma manufactures bags and other accessories recycling old materials. A first type of these materials is represented by pages of illustrated newspapers of the Fifties and Sixties, treated with resins and polypropylene, giving life to bags, each one unique, that, in an ingenuous way, also report old news stories. Another material is old seamstress measuring tapes. Eventually, even more special is the innovation to use authentic old class tests retrieved from school archives. Thanks to waste sustainability, Momaboma’s practices represent an alternative to the pulp-mill, but also a fortuitous archive for reading unofficial texts.

In 2013, on the international fashion scene appeared a brand based in Calabria, named Cangiarì, which bases its production entirely on social enterprises. Targeted at a high-end and luxury clientele, the brand connects a network of local producers involved in the care of land and employing people in need. The enterprises of the network deal with the whole supply chain, from hand-weaving to marketing and communication. They also monitor the woven clothes and the dyes, ensuring they are organic and certified. The name Cangiarì is also instructive from a semantic point of view,

considering that in Calabrian dialect it means “to change.” And changing is exactly the goal of those experiences within the trend of “ethical fashion,” which makes awareness its main basis, as well as that of “critical fashion,” where the word “critical” means “choosing.” Here the choice is made in the production, exchange, and consumption of well-made goods.

Awareness means knowing the materials, knowing who worked in the production, having an idea of how much respect was given to the environment and to people, in order to manufacture that garment that we buy or glance at in a beautiful shop window. Awareness also means promoting enterprises who want to elbow their way in by challenging, especially in some places, the criminal control over the territory and the economy, which pollutes the textile sector—among others—above all in the south of Italy. Awareness means commitment to use the enterprise, culture, and aesthetic of the objects as grounds for social reintegration.

This is demonstrated by the case of Made in Carcere, a brand founded in Lecce, in Puglia, in 2007. Made in Carcere manufactures bags and clothing accessories by reusing waste material: the workers are all local women who, in this way, collaborate in a project of social reintegration. The era we are living in violently juxtaposes extreme signs like luxury and poverty, as well as power and exploitation. However, we might also discover that luxury can be an opportunity, that futile products can become really useful, as testified by the women of Made in Carcere. Local industry can aim for being compared with the avant-garde on global stage. Ethical, environmental, and supportive values are essential today to create a notion of luxury adequate to the present era. This is well understood and is what is coherently targeted by the very few “humanistic enterprises” that conjoin sustainability, culture of materials, and respect for people. Among them is a popular Italian cashmere brand, Brunello Cucinelli, which situates employees, places, and quality at the core of its enterprise, planning that one third of the profit goes to the employees—who receive higher wages compared to the sector’s average—one third to the territory, and one third to the wage of the entrepreneur.

Even a fashion capital like Milan has somehow recycled itself—especially as the result of the global event Expo 2015—multiplying other events next to the more official initiatives that are accountable to ethics and sustainability. An example of this is the So Critical So Fashion event, which has been taking place since 2013 in Milan during fashion week. During such an

event, independent brands, stylists, artisans, fashion designers who deal with the environment and quality, creative workshops, as well as brands of refined dressmaking, have the opportunity to show off their products. Italy is thus connected to the new fashion capitals from around the world, like Sao Paulo in Brazil and Dakar in Senegal, meeting points of large social and cultural energies addressing sustainability, and from continents with a long history of ecological and economic exploitation.

If, on the one hand, the idea of natural textile is valuable, above all for the Italian manufacturing culture, on the other hand technology continues to be an essential element within the field of possible innovations, even in fashion. The historically laden factory, Moessmer, patented an entirely fireproof fabric, which can be used for tapestry and clothes. In such a case, as in others, naturalness is an added element of exception, which accompanies the tough process fashion is experiencing in some of its sectors, seeking to communicate by means of clothes, which is a form of awareness and an ethical sense related to the sustainability of its production and circulation processes.

Among natural technologies dealt with by Italian companies and brands, there are extremely simple, attractive, and amenable ideas, such as the purse endowed with a photo-voltaic cell that lets you charge mobile devices inside, or that of a notebook holder capable of charging the notebook directly with solar energy. More sophisticated are the nanotechnologies applied to textiles, already tested in the production of technical sportswear and workwear, which hold and produce heat or protect from electromagnetic radiation. Even geolocation is embedded in the textile in such a way that, for instance, a garment can work as an “antenna” to reveal the location of the person wearing it. Sportswear can also assume the task of monitoring the athlete’s heart rate or blood pressure thanks to the direct contact with the body. Through nature and technology there are many paths opened to fashion in Italy. These are cultural and economic models able to promote research joining sustainability, practicality, and aesthetics.

Ending Observations

Fashion is a system of signs that regulates relations between the individual and the society, between past and present, between men and women, between young and old, between body and space. Like a language, fashion

makes it possible to identify a community, such as a social group, a generation, or a national identity. Italy is known throughout the world as the “country of fashion.” It is a definition that corresponds to verifiable truth, but at the same time it hides some stereotypes, as always happens when the concept of identity is placed center stage. Identity is indeed a slippery concept, for if it unifies a group or a community, it also separates external factors that are contingent to it or do not fit its remit. On the contrary, among modern sociocultural systems, fashion is the system most exposed to contamination.

Today, fashion is once again becoming a sector in which Italy plays a leading role, not only from an economic point of view, but also from a cultural one, in the broadest sense. Italy is the physical and ideal place where a virtuous web of culture was established. It is where fashion meets cinema, art, literature, scientific and technological research, gastronomy, and tourism. Today, all these sectors see signs of a new launch and a new collaboration that welcome the relevant contributions brought about by technological and humanistic research, and unite ideas on fields that are both local and international. The identity of Italian fashion is therefore not closed in itself, but rather a transcultural taste, a canny game that incorporates time, things, and people.

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

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NOTES

English translation from Italian by Claudia Corriero. Proofreader Emily Bowles.

1. The Triennale di Milano is an international cultural institution founded in 1923; it deals with art, design, architecture, fashion, cinema, communication, and society. Since 2012, it has hosted a section dedicated to fashion, coordinated by Eleonora Fiorani.

2. The curators of the exhibition were Paola Bertola and Vittorio Linfante.

3. Baldassare Castiglione, *Il libro del Cortegiano* (1528; repr., Torino: Einaudi, 1997); Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, trans. George Anthony Bull (New York: Penguin, 1976).

4. Eugenia Paulicelli, *Writing Fashion in Early Modern Italy* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), 75.

5. This was the definition given to a specific environment, typical of the '80s and inspired by hedonistic values of unrestrained consumption, of "easy" success and richness. Fashionable Milan was its symbol.

6. Tullio De Mauro, *Storia linguistica dell'Italia unita*, 3rd ed. (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2011).

7. Popular tourist and socialite destinations: Cortina, a small town in the Dolomiti mountain; Capri, island in the Tirrenian sea, opposite Naples.

8. Sofia Gnoli, *Un secolo di moda italiana, 1900–2000* (Roma: Meltemi, 2005).

9. Patrizia Calefato, *Mass moda: Linguaggio e immaginario del corpo rivestito* (Genova: Costa & Nolan, 1996); *Mass moda* (Roma: Meltemi, 2007).

10. Luisa Valeriani, "Colazione da Fiorucci," in *Fatto in Italia: La cultura del Made in Italy (1960–2000)*, ed. Paola Colaiacono (Roma: Meltemi, 2006), 26–64.

11. Eugenia Paulicelli, ed., *Moda e moderno* (Roma: Meltemi, 2006), 129–50.

12. Gillo Dorfles, *Simbolo comunicazione consumo* (Torino: Einaudi, 1962), 198–99.

13. Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. J. Osborne (London: Verso, 1998), 178.

14. *Ibid.*, 166.

15. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. H. Eiland and K. McLaughlin on the basis of the German ed. by R. Tiedemann (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), 328.

16. *Ibid.*, 331.

17. The literal meaning is "waste with affection"; the Italian word *rifiuto* (waste) can also mean "I reject."