The Globalisation of Luxury Fashion:

The Case of Gucci

John Armitage and *Joanne Roberts*

Abstract

This article offers the reader an encounter with crucial writings on the globalisation of luxury fashion. In so doing, it introduces an original conceptualisation of luxury fashion. The historical meaning of the globalisation of luxury fashion from Roman times up until the present period is examined. The globalisation of Gucci, the Italian luxury fashion brand specialising in leather goods, is then analysed. Through this case study the complexity of the globalisation of luxury fashion is revealed. The Italian luxury fashion brand has from its inception in 1921 drawn on and absorbed a range of cultures from across the globe. Globalisation of national luxury fashion brands is, therefore, far from unidirectional. Rather, such processes involve a multidirectional flow of luxury cultural influences. Indeed, it is concluded that luxury fashion itself is a globalising medium of luxury culture.

Key words: Globalisation; Gucci; Italian Luxury; Luxury Culture; Luxury Fashion.

Biographical Notes:

John Armitage is Professor of Media Arts and co-Director of the Winchester Luxury Research Group at Winchester School of Art, University of Southampton, UK. John is the author of *Luxury and Visual Culture* (Bloomsbury 2020) and the co-editor, with Joanne Roberts, of *The Third Realm of Luxury: Connecting Real Places and Imaginary Spaces* (Bloomsbury 2020) and *Critical Luxury Studies: Art, Design, Media* (Edinburgh University Press 2016).

j.armitage@soton.ac.uk

Joanne Roberts is Professor in Arts and Cultural Management and Director of the Winchester Luxury Research Group at Winchester School of Art at the University of Southampton, UK. She is co-editor with John Armitage of *The Third Realm of Luxury: Connecting Real Places and Imaginary Spaces* (Bloomsbury, 2020) and *Critical Luxury Studies: Art, Design, Media* (Edinburgh University Press, 2016).

j.roberts@soton.ac.uk

Introduction

Luxury is a central concept in the study of fashion, both as an indicator of sumptuousness and as a guide to comfortable living or surroundings. This article offers readers an encounter with crucial writings on luxury and on one of the most important fashion debates of the twenty-first century, namely, the globalisation of luxury fashion, or, the world-wide development and meaning of luxury culture and the art and craft of fashion, particularly since the nineteenth century. In exploring those influential ideas associated with luxury and their impact upon fashion, we trace their entanglement with globalisation through a case study of Gucci, the Italian luxury brand of fashion and leather goods, and other key events such as Gucci's foundation, its revenues, global branding, sales, and the appointment of Alessandro Michele as creative director. We conclude with an assessment of the main changes in luxury fashion and offer an original understanding of the globalisation of luxury fashion to critically and theoretically aware readers concerned with contemporary luxury fashion brands such as Gucci. But let us begin with a definition of luxury fashion.

Luxury Fashion

What is the meaning of the term luxury fashion?[1] Is it an economic term concerned with luxury goods wherein demand increases more than proportionately as income rises, so that outlays on luxury goods become a larger proportion of people's general spending? Is it an aesthetic term concerned with the luxurious expression at a time, place, and in a specific context, particularly in making luxury clothing, luxury footwear, luxury lifestyles, luxury accessories, luxury makeup, luxury hairstyles, and the luxury fashioning of body proportions? Certainly, luxury fashion, conceived in terms of luxury goods, can not only be juxtaposed with necessity goods, where, once basic needs are met, demand increases proportionally less than income, but also with luxury trends, which suggest a unique aesthetic expression that frequently lasts less than a season. Hence, luxury fashion can be defined as luxury or superior fashion goods that are distinctive and industry-supported expressions traditionally tied to the fashion seasons and collections.

Yet luxury fashion has taken on three leading contemporary senses. First, usually and impartially, luxury fashion means a luxurious style, an expression that continues over numerous seasons and is repeatedly linked to cultural movements and social indicators,

symbols, inscriptions, class, art, and history where it refers to a distinctive, familiar pattern or a form, normally meaning just the visual appearance of worked luxury fashion materials, or a way of doing luxury fashion. However, a second leading contemporary meaning of luxury fashion has assumed, habitually with a negative insinuation, as not so much to mean popular, superficial, or trivial, but to mean what Quentin Bell calls 'conspicuous outrage':[2] here near-nakedness, shock, and outrage emerge because of individual luxury fashion designers who sprint ahead of the luxury fashion of the day, joyfully present themselves and their clothes as recipients for criticism by detractors and consumers, and courageously challenge would-be censors and extant proprieties. Thus we find Alexander McQueen's first autumn/winter 1995 presentation, entitled 'Highland Rape', referencing England's violation of Scotland; McQueen's models later teetering around a rubbish pile at the centre of the runway during his 'Horn of Plenty' autumn/winter 2009 show, which McQueen dedicated to his late mother; and, finally, McQueen's spring/summer 2010 and last collection that was not only the birthplace of his reptilian armadillo shoes, later favoured by the American singer-songwriter Lady Gaga, but also the first time a luxury brand live-streamed its runway show ('Plato's Atlantis') online.[3] It is the tone of disobedience which differentiates McQueen's socio-cultural approach (and that of other luxury fashion designers, such as France's 'enfant terrible', Jean Paul Gaultier,[4] known for his unconventional designs employing corsets, conical brassieres and gender defying ensembles). This insistent non-conformity results in a sort of contemporary luxury fashion which, in the case of McQueen, takes it to logical conclusions which, initially at least, many people found intolerable. The term luxury fashion, however, has a third specific and recognisable use within visual culture,[5] defined as the interrelated systems of knowledge and pictorial representation advanced since the Florentine renaissance; socio-cultural systems influenced by new visual abilities and methods entailing measurement and ordering conventions used in art and luxury, fashion and business. Moreover, the term visual culture has typically been used in modern and contemporary advanced societies since the nineteenth century. And, in its inclusiveness of objects of study extending beyond the variety of items generally incorporated within the customary classifications of art, luxury, or fashion, the concept of visual culture denotes a modified explanation of the concepts and methods required to comprehend these societies and the status of culture – and the actions and identities of their consumers within them. Nevertheless, luxury fashion not only has a certain and recognisable usage within visual

culture but also as the wide-ranging subject of twentieth-century and contemporary material-visual practices that also includes the applied arts and decoration, design, product manufacture, and print and communication graphics.

Similarly, the production of luxury clothing and fashion accessories, like any other form of human labour, necessitates the use and transformation of an assortment of material and intellectual resources. To illustrate this meaning of the production of luxury fashion requiring work process (incentive, materials, and talents) and final product, consider French *haute couture* ('high sewing' or 'high dressmaking'), which is the manufacture of high-class custom-fitted clothing.[6] *Haute couture* is luxury fashion that is made by hand, created from high-grade, costly, frequently rare and or strange fabric and sewn with attention to detail and finished by knowledgeable and accomplished sewers—often using laborious, hand-finished needlework methods. An *haute couture* garment is always made for an individual client and tailored explicitly for the wearer's measurements and body posture. In view of the quantity of time, money, and skilfulness assigned to each finished piece, *haute couture* garments are also described as clothes that have no price tag because the budget for them is immaterial. In contemporary France, *haute couture* is a protected name that may not be used except by individuals and companies that meet the precise standards of the *Chambre Syndicale de la Haute* such as Adeline André, Alexis Mabille, Dior, and Givenchy.

Given these three meanings, with the negative senses of populism, superficiality, triviality, and conspicuous outrage often waiting in the wings, the term luxury fashion functions in a continually unstable manner, meaning that luxury fashion's way of doing things or its style is sometimes used derogatively to refer to a luxury fashion garment that too-obviously accentuates a certain formal trait or element, perhaps borrowed from an earlier luxury fashion designer, luxury fashion garment, or luxury fashion style.

This last is important since the way luxury fashion is articulated by one person may be different from the way it is interpreted or used by another. Within luxury fashion, for instance, interpretation can mean a luxury 'fashion statement'. Here, the significance or meaning of some luxury garment that people own or wear, often something that is considered new or different, is not only founded upon fashion materials of numerous sorts, but also put into a form that is intended to make other people notice. Interpretation can also be used to explain how luxury fashion designers come to make their luxury fashion designs: they may

be said, for example, to interpret a luxury fashion brand in a specific way. In the 1980s, for instance, the late German luxury fashion designer Karl Lagerfeld was hired by the luxury fashion brand Chanel, which was considered a near-lifeless brand at the time following the death of the brand's founder, Coco Chanel.[7] Nonetheless, Lagerfeld brought the brand back to life, making it a success by re-interpreting Coco Chanel's ready-to-wear fashion line and integrating her 'CC' monograph into the promotional language of Chanel. Contemporary luxury fashion design is then about interpretation in the sense of being about the self-expression of luxury fashion designers, who use their medium of luxurious materials to communicate their feelings and attitudes concerning, in the case of Lagerfeld at Chanel, tweeds, gold accents, and chains. Consequently, the luxury fashion designer as interpreter translates one luxury fashion good into another (in Lagerfeld's case, a near- dead luxury fashion brand into a thriving ready-to-wear fashion line). Furthermore, although one may say that the two luxury fashion goods enter a kind of equivalence, they remain different luxury fashion goods. Luxury fashion designers (and their designs) can thus be thought of as vessels, channels, or even media through which other luxury fashion goods speak: the ghostly genius of deceased luxury fashion designers and designs, or the sensibility and purposes of those living. Still, luxury fashion design, not to mention luxury fashion history and criticism, whatever their assertions of objectivity or authority in interpretation, remain speculative and questionable practices. For whilst it is true that specific interpretations or principles have not hardened into settled truths within luxury fashion historical and critical discourse, it is also the case that their truth status is a matter of on-going agreement or custom rather than of conclusive scientific proof.

Luxury fashion, as a result, has less to do with the meaning of the popular, the superficial, the trivial, and the conspicuously outrageous and more to do with the principles and truths of luxury fashion's historical, contemporary, and less than critical relationship with mass culture: the visual-cultural products and forms of production founded on industrial, reproductive technologies that are consumed in an equally collective way.[8] For whilst we can consider luxury fashion as part of the discourse of mass culture, the true status of luxury fashion is just as ambiguous and open to different meanings and interpretations as TV programmes and Hollywood movies. Additionally, luxury fashion often finds itself part of the dispute over the value of mass culture, of the meaning and importance ascribed to luxury fashion designers and their designs.[9] This active process of evaluation signifies that the value

of a specific discourse concerning luxury fashion within mass culture or belonging to luxury fashion goods that are disputed is not, and can never be, inherent: value is always bestowed by someone and frequently through a process involving the power of companies like Hermès. On the other hand, luxury fashion designs, customarily of a traditional and conventional type, that have reached iconic status regularly appear to hold and radiate their own value as if it were an inherent property. Hermès' Birkin tote bag, for example, handmade in leather and named after the English actress and singer Jane Birkin (who, in dispute with Hermès, asked the company to stop using her name for the crocodile version due to her ethical concerns), emits an aura of wealth, exclusivity, and ultimate luxury fashion brand value that appears obvious (high price), irrefutable (a long waiting list), and permanent (collectable and rare). This case confirms the power luxury fashion companies such as Hermès have in influencing and orchestrating the value assigned to specific goods as seemingly ordinary as a woman's tote bag. Thus, in securing this value over extended periods of time, and promoting such historical value as the inoffensive sounding 'heritage', companies like Hermès play a crucial role in the socio-cultural reproduction of luxury fashion.

However, luxury fashion designers and luxury fashion companies also occasionally generate new evaluations, enshrining and elevating luxury fashion goods with hitherto unheard of, insecure, or directly-denied luxury fashion status. French luxury fashion designer Yves Saint Laurent's 1965 'Mondrian Collection', though a homage to the work of several modern artists, including the paintings of Piet Mondrian, is an illustration of this production of value through the novel convergence of modern luxury fashion and modern art.[10] The value of luxury fashion, it should be noted, is usually a relative concept within examinations of dress, design, and the visual language of style and its luxurious historical meaning summarised here demonstrates that a gage or measure of values exists, and that any one luxury fashion good ordinarily finds its status within this scale. Since the development of the socio-cultural histories of luxury fashion, expressly since the 1960s, value, meaning, and importance referring to aesthetic and human qualities or worth have been exposed to critique from various perspectives. For instance, in 2015, feminists and other critics in the United Kingdom (UK) successfully campaigned to persuade the Advertising Standards Authority to ban advertisements for the Yves Saint Laurent (YSL) company in *Elle* magazine because they featured models who were unhealthily underweight, drawing attention to their visible rib cages, and very thin thighs, knees, and legs.

Luxury fashion, therefore, must operate today in a sometimes uneasy relationship with its critics and in a close relationship with advertising: advertising sells specific luxury fashion goods such as YSL tank tops as individualistic, often through luxury fashion magazines, for example, *Harper's Bazaar*. But, unquestionably, such luxury fashion regimes are all a part of the contemporary globalisation of capitalism, its marketing strategies, and its consumption patterns produced by global luxury fashion multinational corporations such as Switzerland's Richemont group. Let us turn, then, to the question of the globalisation of luxury fashion.

The Globalisation of Luxury Fashion

Like the term luxury fashion, the meaning of the globalisation of luxury fashion is at once economic (luxury goods) and aesthetic (luxurious countenances, clothing, existences, accoutrements, and bodies). Although initially a concept devised within sociology and political history, globalisation has become a significant and powerful way of thinking about the development of luxury fashion goods, the meaning of luxury, and the aesthetics of fashionable appearance, particularly since the nineteenth century.[11] However, vital differences, along with resemblances, should be recognised between the concept of the globalisation of luxury fashion and several other (more well-known and traditional) connected ideas, including colonial luxury fashion goods, imperial luxury fashion services, and the international history of the luxury fashion industry, its seasons, and collections.

The globalisation of luxury fashion might be thought of as one of a constellation of terms through which we might try to theorise a sense of luxurious style, and historically show, in recognisable form, the interconnectedness of the world of luxury fashion and all its producers, distributors, and consumers.[12] In general terms the globalisation of luxury fashion concerns the influence that various parts of the world of luxury fashion have had on other, sometimes popular, sometimes conspicuously outrageous, areas of luxury fashion design and the activities of specific luxury fashion designers. As such, the globalisation of luxury fashion is not a process that began one, two, three, or even five hundred years ago. Separate clothing regions in the world of luxury fashion developed specific socio-cultural systems and luxurious consumption proprieties thousands of years ago. Moreover, through such systems, proprieties, and processes, including trading luxury goods, the exploration of 'exotic'

fashions, royal and aristocratic intermarriage, and military victory (recall Alexander McQueen's allusion to England's defilement of Scotland), began the intermingling of often geographically neighbouring luxurious societies and fashion cultures and their reciprocal impact upon one another. Consider the intermixing and mutual influence of ancient luxury fashion in Rome and Gaul (present day France). Rome dressed in brown, Gaul preferred red. Here, Gaul not only set its luxury fashion against Rome but also, as the poet Horace put it, thought it most useful to appraise women's bodies through their dresses of wild silk and for them to wear costly Tyrian purple, a reddish-purple natural dye extracted from the secretions produced by predatory sea snails.[13]

The growth of the modern European nation-states, accompanied by the disciplines of history and the field of luxury fashion history, did not occur until the nineteenth century.[14] Luxury fashion history, as the designation given to the historical study of luxury fashion, for example, does not simply entail considerations of models and runways, collections, and technologies but also such practices as luxury fashion curation and research, teaching, and the planning for publication of articles on luxury fashion attitudes, books on luxury fashion design, and catalogues focused on nationally specific luxury fashion designers (e.g. France's Hubert de Givenchy, Italy's Gianni Versace, and Great Britain's Vivienne Westwood).[15] This work is carried out not by luxury fashion designers themselves but by those working in scholarly or higher education institutional settings, for instance universities (e.g. Parsons School of Design, New York) and, increasingly, luxury fashion history museums, such as The Palais Galliera, also known as the Musée de la Mode de la Ville de Paris (City of Paris Fashion Museum). Since the twentieth century, though principally after the Second World War, luxury fashion history in this sense became not so much a formal academic discipline as an informal academic field. Equipped with a non-established curriculum and non-standard aims and objectives concerning, for example, textile design, luxury fashion history is today taught at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. The field thus produces specialists in luxury and experts in fashion employed in various locations including teaching fashion design in prestigious fashion schools (e.g. the Istituto Marangoni, Milan) and universities (e.g. Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts, London). Additionally, the field of luxury fashion history entails the buying and selling of luxury fashion in auction houses, curation, and conservation in cultural museums (e.g. the Victoria and Albert Museum, London), and, of late, broadcasting knowledge about, and pictorial representations of, luxury fashion on radio,

television, the Internet, and social media: FashionTV, for instance, is an international luxury fashion and lifestyle broadcasting television channel based in Paris with over 400 million viewers around the world.[16] Luxury fashion history's status as an informal field consists, too, in sets of concepts related to socio-cultural systems and principles concerning visual skills and techniques, objects and methods of study involving measurement and the luxury fashion business, together with some semi-foundational arguments and values declared to underpin and direct the over-all investigation, such as the visual culture of luxury fashion.[17] Since the early days of the field's development in universities in Europe in the twentieth century, though, these rudimentary components have advanced and increased into the arenas of fine art, visual consumption, and the culture of design and thus far beyond any narrow definition of luxury fashion.[18] Consequently, given that luxury fashion is now such a broad field encompassing materials, the applied arts, decoration, design, product manufacture, and print and communication graphics, it is unlikely that any agreement exists over the main concerns of the field of study.

Hence, the twin developments of the rise of the modern European nation-states and the field of luxury fashion history transformed how the production of the past was seen and assessed: luxury fashion history became, fundamentally, not a history of people producing luxury fashion but a history of luxury fashion within particular 'nations', while many of the nation states that comprise Europe today did not exist in official or political terms until the nineteenth century. Contemplate Italy, founded in 1860, and the idea of the production of luxury fashion in the Italian renaissance.[19] Signifying the 'rebirth' or revitalisation of ancient classical materials, ideas, and values in the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries, the idea of the production of luxury fashion in the Italian renaissance arguably remains a dominant conceptual keystone within any western fashion history centred on, for example, *haute couture*. During the Italian renaissance, for instance, fashion for both men and women was extravagant and expensive, crafted from velvet, ribbons, and jewels. Popular and influential across Europe, Italian renaissance luxury fashion was influenced by the art of Michelangelo, Leonard da Vinci, and Raphael: for women, this meant full, gathered, and pleated skirts, custom-fitted busts and waists, and, for men, large custom-fitted waistcoats underneath hand pleated overcoats with wide, puffed, sleeves made from high-quality brocade.[20] Luxury fashion in the Italian renaissance thus shaped the field of luxury fashion history and its essential meanings concerning fabrics and assessments of luxury sewing and fashioned

details and finishing before and after its alleged occurrence in Italy (and in the rest of southern and then northern Europe). It is essential to state 'alleged' since the expression Italian renaissance, unlike the term luxury fashion, only appeared in the English language from the French in the nineteenth century. Accordingly, people living in what is now Italy during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries did not themselves have the term renaissance or its modern senses.[21] Indeed, the original historical meaning of the Italian renaissance is associated with the nineteenth-century writings of the German academic Jakob Burckhardt on *The Civilisation of the Renaissance in Italy*.[22] Burckhardt's purpose was to offer a pre-history to an explanation of Germany's cultural and political pre-eminence which denoted, he argued, the modern flowering of the roots of European civilisation seeded in its previous Italian 'rebirth'. The idea and production of the Italian renaissance, therefore, is not only a self-conscious and retrospective concept, choosing and highlighting constituents that play a part in an already established narrative of events, developments, and meanings, but also, in this, and in the sense of luxury fashion, a fabrication invented in the nineteenth century. Globalising interactions, particularly those built around the commissioning of luxury fashion sewers and needle-workers in 'Italy' between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries, were typically organised between cities, not nation-states.[23] The centres of rival luxury garments, fashion and dressmaking, skills and design, and particularly elite urban activity (e.g. The House of Medici, the banking family and political dynasty of Cosimo de' Medici in the Republic of Florence) during the Italian renaissance, for example, were the cities of Venice and Milan, Florence, Naples, and Rome, which produced luxurious textiles and fashion designs featuring sumptuous silks and furs, satin, taffeta, ostrich plumes, and peacock feathers.

The globalisation of luxury fashion remains a chief constituent of the meaning of postmodern discourse in the present period. This is because postmodern discourse can be used as a term to denote developments in the manner of luxury culture and the style of fashion since the 1960s, though some critics and theorists have maintained that the geneses of postmodern luxury fashion can be found earlier in the twentieth century. Postmodern luxury fashion, not unlike some other interrelated terms (for instance, modern luxury fashion) implies, occasionally bewilderingly, both to interpretations, or theories of clothing, and to the clothing itself. For example, one theorist of postmodernism who considers luxury fashion, Malcolm Barnard, states that the new fashion collections he considers endeavour to represent

the elements of crisis associated with contemporary identity, meaning, and communication (e.g.: Hussein Chalayan's 'Afterwords' fashion collection, shown in the Sadler's Wells theatre in London, which focused on the involuntary and dramatic impact of mobility and forced migration (2000)) .[24] This critical approach towards previous representations of the clothed body is a principal trait of postmodern thinking which inherently sees its theoretical and critical precursors retrospectively: in a completed past where luxury fashion once literally stood for people's socio-cultural identities. Barnard, explaining the postmodern theory of luxury fashion, is critical of, for instance, claims that Chalayan (contemporary luxury fashion designer and brand) holds that the design and appearance of new fashion collections could and should just 'create' their own unmediated reality. In contrast, Barnard stresses the political and humanitarian effects of Chalayan's fashion collections which Barnard calls a postmodern form of self-expression. A sense of historical, critical, and creative 'afterness', consequently, typifies much postmodern luxury fashion and theorising, as Chalayan's 'Afterwords' fashion collection and the prefix 'post-' implies, and hinting, perhaps, that such fashion collections uncover the voices, senses, and meanings of luxury fashion that people are unfamiliar with.

However, the globalisation of luxury fashion is also a significant constituent of postmodern and contemporary discourses concerning the endeavour to theorise the repercussions of the diffusion around the world of numerous technologies for visual representation, such as TV, film, video, the internet, and social media.[25] Are these globalised forms, luxurious conventions, and technical means of fashion, in the company of their predominantly European multinational corporate producers, generating a homogenising discourse of value and a single mass or world technoculture?[26] Is the globalisation of luxury fashion a process which, though disseminating a homogeneous visual culture of representation, at the same time, is confirming and entrenching (through, for example, Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter), the power of specific nation-states and corporations, particularly those of Europe? Consider that four of the top five global luxury fashion goods multinational corporate producers by sales are European. France's LVMH (Louis Vuitton Moet Hennessey), for instance, owns the following luxury fashion brands: Louis Vuitton, Fendi, Bulgari, Loro Piana, Emilio Pucci, Acqua di Parma, Loewe, Marc Jacobs, TAG Heuer, and Benefit Cosmetics.[27] What has become obvious is that the history of modern luxury fashion (e.g. Louis Vuitton travel trunks) has had significant transnational aspects which

never were and never could be limited to an invented ideal of undisputed national heritage, growth, and communication. Modern French luxury fashion designers such as Yves Saint Laurent (himself born in Algeria), for example, sought out times and places of inspiration beyond Europe such as Morocco, an Arab country in Africa colonised by France in the twentieth century. Designing a luxurious life and a fashion world not wholly tainted by Europe, Saint Laurent created and advertised his first 'Safari Jacket' (which borrowed male codes of dress to revolutionise women's fashion) in 1967-68.[28] The philosophical denial is evident: it was the already existing French colonial empire uniforms and outfits worn by occidental men in Africa that supplied the condition and opportunity for Saint Laurent to romanticise a mythical time and place ('the safari') as somewhere seemingly beyond the known and increasingly globalised world of luxury fashion governed by the European nation-states.

The Case of Gucci

Gucci is an Italian luxury fashion brand specialising in leather goods. But what is the meaning of the globalisation of luxury fashion for this brand founded by Guccio Gucci (1881-1953) in Florence, Tuscany, in 1921?[29] Undoubtedly, there is the economic dimension, given that Gucci luxury fashion goods regularly generate yearly revenues globally in the billions of United States (US) dollars (Deloitte 2020). There is also the aesthetic dimension: for instance, Gucci is not only frequently ranked in the top five luxury brands, but its luxurious expressions, clothing, lifestyles, and accessories are so popular with customers that it remains the highest selling Italian luxury fashion brand. Furthermore, as a luxury fashion brand with a long social history, Gucci is at the forefront of the globalisation of luxury fashion. Owning and controlling 487 directly operated stores globally, Gucci is an important and influential player in the global growth of luxury fashion goods, inclusive of wholesaling its products through franchises and luxury department stores.[30] Today, therefore, the meaning of Gucci as a luxury fashion brand is valued in billions of dollars through its aesthetics of stylish expression that generate sales on a global scale. How has this Italian luxury fashion brand and purveyor of leather goods born in the early twentieth century become such a global economic and creative industry leader?

The globalisation of Gucci as a luxury fashion brand is not something that we can easily theorise but we can point to Guccio Gucci's sense of fine leather goods with classic styling, and historically demonstrate, in familiar form, the interconnectedness of Guccio Gucci's world of luxury fashion: an Italian immigrant hotel worker in Paris and London, Gucci noted the luxurious luggage guests brought to the Savoy Hotel, visited British luggage manufacturers, and established a shop in his birthplace of Florence in 1921.[31] Employing skilled artisans combined with industrial methods of production and traditional fabrication, the growing global distribution and consumption of Gucci luxury goods impacted the world of luxury fashion in numerous ways: during the 1950s and 1960s, for example, fashionable celebrities such as Jackie Kennedy and conspicuously outrageous film stars like Peter Sellers turned Gucci's luxury fashion designs into global status symbols. Consequently, such activities as movie stars posing in individually fashioned Gucci clothing, designer accessories, and footwear for lifestyle magazines around the world contributed to Gucci's developing reputation. As such, the globalisation of Gucci as a luxury fashion brand is a process that commenced in the mid-twentieth century. Yet Florence remains a distinct clothing city-region distinguished for high quality materials in the world of luxury fashion where it has established specific production and retail, organisational, and industrial systems and luxurious consumption and style, craft, finishing, and stitching proprieties since the fourteenth century. Furthermore, through such systems, proprieties, and processes, including the expansion of Gucci to include stores in Milan and Rome, the brand's exploration of finely crafted leather accessories such as handbags, luxury brand collaborations (e.g. the Gucci Rolls Royce luggage set was introduced as early as 1970), and acquiring other luxury brands (e.g. Yves Saint Laurent Rive Gauche in 1997), instigated the melding of increasingly geographically distant luxury fashion brand operations and their joint effect upon one another and their societies and cultures. Consider, for instance, the blending and shared influence of Gucci's luxury fashion operations in Italy and the US in the 1950s. Gucci's Italian stores featured such excellently constructed leather goods as the brand's iconic ornamented loafers, whilst, in the US, Gucci initially expanded its luxury fashion horizons by establishing its first US administrative offices in New York City in 1953.[32] At that time, Gucci's US office did not so much set itself counter to its Italian headquarters but began assessing the power of celebrity bodies and film stars' dressing in silks and wearing expensive knitwear adorned with Gucci's signature double-G symbol combined with prominent red and green bands.

The rise of the modern European nation-states such as Italy in the nineteenth century predates the history of Gucci as a luxury fashion brand. However, this does not mean that Gucci as a luxury fashion brand has no history or that we cannot study it. For example, Gucci is not simply involved in the production of runway collections but also such practices as curating and researching its own luxury fashion history, in teaching about, and publishing on, its own luxury fashion outlook, design, and designers (e.g. Dawn Mello, Tom Ford, and Steinunn Sigurðardóttir in the 1980s and 1990s). This effort at Gucci is performed by scholars of Gucci fashion design and history at the Gucci Museo in Florence. Since 2011, Gucci's own fashion history has thus become an informal academic sub-field located within the Gucci Museo at the fourteenth century Palazzo della Mercanzia in Florence's Piazza della Signoria.[33] Furnished with archives and cultural experiences relating to, for instance, print and suitcase design, Gucci's fashion history is nowadays teaching all who visit it about Gucci craftsmanship. The informal academic sub-field of Gucci fashion history is, therefore, presently producing authorities in luxury wallpaper and professionals in everything from fashionable travel trunks and jewelry to watches, not to mention further educating fashion school and university teachers of design in Italy and elsewhere. Moreover, the informal academic sub-field of Gucci fashion history has involved the founding, in Florence in 2018, of the Gucci ArtLab, a school for luxury fashion crafts and cultural technologies.[34] More recently, Gucci has become concerned with disseminating its knowledge about innovation and creativity in luxury fashion under the direction of Gucci's Creative Director, Alessandro Michele. Designed to seed Gucci with a young, visually literate, social media savvy, and dynamic attitude, classes of young workers fashion leather and velvet for a global luxury lifestyle founded on Michele's signature neo-Romantic hippiedom and shaman-esque tapestries, wild-flower patterns, rainbows, and birds.[35] Gucci's fashion history and luxury standing at present consists in the re-conceptualisation of the brand through a new educational system and company principles regarding fashion abilities and factory procedures, objects and methods of study entailing the shaping of bamboo bag handles and the luxurious colouring of leather, along with some creative arguments and factory values claimed to reinforce and guide the learning and communication, teaching, and experience, such as the idea of bringing Gucci's culture of luxury fashion creation under one roof. It is still the first phase for Gucci's growth of its ArtLab in Florence, and, no doubt, in the future, these basic elements will evolve and multiply into other areas of luxury fashion, such as

challenging Italy's culture of patriarchal fashion processes traditionally based on small groups of geographically isolated workers. Far outside any restricted characterisation of luxury fashion work, Gucci's wide-ranging arena today includes materials and values; the applied arts and diversity; decoration and inclusivity; product and culture; manufacture and coffee bars; and print and art. In short, the old consensus has been replaced by a newly emergent one less concerned with patriarchy and homespun feelings and more with high-tech innovation, empowerment, and accelerated craft processes.

For this reason, the informal academic sub-field of Gucci fashion history is altering how the production of the brand's history is seen and evaluated: Gucci's fashion history is becoming, in large part, not merely a history of people such as Alessandro Michele creating Gucci fashion but a history of Gucci fashion beyond the growth of the modern European nation-states. No longer constrained by the nation-states that constitute Europe currently, the global 'world' of Gucci does not exist in formal or geographical terms. Consider the world of Gucci in the twenty-first century, and the idea of the production of Gucci fashion in the world brought about by Michele. We might, for example, refer to the reawakening or revival of Gucci through Michele's love of natural motifs and spiritual notions. Or we might consider Michele's values concerning the production of Gucci fashion in this world as debatably the central theoretical lynchpin within its contemporary fashion history. Side-stepping nineteenth-century *haute couture* on the one hand, Michele's creative direction and exceptionally potent aesthetic nevertheless returns to the nineteenth century through his conjuring up of the world of Roman antiquarian and apothecary shops, their hidden jewels, and objects of curiosity. In Michele's world, for instance, Gucci fashion for both men and women is exaggerated yet eclectic, high-priced yet retro, crafted from flock-velvet and faux-fur. À la mode and prominent across the world, Michele's world of Gucci fashion is inspired by, among other things, the art of the Belle Epoque, twentieth century American and European cinema, and 1940s zoot suit tailoring: for contemporary gender-neutral bodies, this implies 1950s sunglasses and 1960s visored helmet hats, masks, antique rings, eyebrows dyed lemon yellow, silicon teardrops, and spiked leather collars. Gucci fashion within the world built by Michele is accordingly remaking the informal academic sub-field of Gucci fashion history and its core meanings relating to cloth such as wool and evaluations of luxury tailoring and shaped details and finishing. But we should remember that Michele's contemporary world of Gucci, the world that is in fact the renaissance of the brand, only

entered the language of Gucci and, consequently, luxury fashion, in 2015 when he was appointed creative director. Therefore, people residing in what is today Michele's world of Gucci in the twenty-first century may not themselves have the term renaissance or its contemporary senses in mind when they think of Gucci. Yet, the accumulated historical meaning of the world of Gucci is bound up with more than its contemporary renaissance. Dawn Mellor and Tom Ford, Steinunn Sigurðardóttir, and Frida Giannini, to name only four former Gucci creative directors, have all contributed to the historical meaning and renaissance of the brand. In the 1990s, for instance, Tom Ford, to take only the most famous of Gucci's creative directors before Michele, introduced Halston-style hipsters, skinny stain shirts, and car-finish metallic patent boots, which were visually represented by the then contemporary French stylist Carine Roitfeld and photographer Mario Testino.[36] Michele's world and rebirthing of Gucci is, therefore, in part, the contemporary culmination of the work of earlier European and American Gucci creative directors. The idea and production of the world of Gucci and its contemporary renaissance, then, can only be a self-aware and nostalgic notion, with Michele selecting and emphasising elements that fit into a previously instituted account of Gucci events, developments, and meanings. It is not that Michele's world and renaissance of Gucci fashion in the twenty-first century is a fiction. Rather, it is that the globalisation of Gucci fashion today is no longer about 'Italy' but about the assembling of alternative worlds that are organised neither between cities nor between nation-states but between global luxury brands. The amorphous 'centres' of competing luxury branded clothes, fashion and tailoring, talents and design, and specifically elite global activity (e.g. François Pinault, the French billionaire businessman and founder of the luxury group Kering, which owns Gucci) within the world that is the rejuvenated Gucci, for example, are the global luxury brands of Bottega Veneta and Fendi, Cartier, Ray Ban, and Omega, which produce luxurious leather goods and fashion designs showcasing polished jewelry, urbane sunglasses, and sophisticated watches.[37]

Does the globalisation of the Gucci fashion brand have anything important to tell us about the meaning of postmodern discourse today? Certainly, Michele's luxury fashion discourse draws on the world of postmodern culture, yet his wild style at Gucci is not a critical interpretation of romanticism or a grand theory of flowers, birds, or animals. Instead, to locate the origins of Michele's Gucci fashion, we must look earlier, to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, well before the zenith of postmodernism in the 1980s. Indeed, Michele's

Gucci fashion, unlike postmodern luxury fashion, refers not only to the modernity of hippiedom, to paisley patterns and long hair, pre-Raphaelite paintings, romantic legends, and the bohemian life of artists, but also to deeper understandings, such as shamanism and quasi-religious practices, to interactions with the spirit world through altered states of consciousness and to theories less about clothing as such and more about clothing oneself for entry into a psychedelic daydream. For Michele, fashion theory at Gucci also draws on nineteenth century pre-modern antiquarianism. Yet Michele makes no claims that his is a wholly new form of fashion, given that his collections rely on wide-ranging turn of the nineteenth century sketches, drawings, and lists in notebooks, and on twentieth century visual representations, stories, experiences, music, and atmospherics. The constituents at work here have little to do with any postmodern crisis of the simulated image and more to do with contemporary high-concept ideas about the history of identity, the meaning of social change, and communicating these through a new language of luxury fashion. Wary of the language of fashion marketing, of branding, and of sales, Michele looks to the visual language of the fresco, of the mural painting that is at once 'fresh' but is also a technique that has been employed since antiquity and is closely connected with Italian Renaissance painting. Michele's new language of luxury fashion, as all his collections demonstrate, is the language of eclecticism, of multiple theories, styles, or ideas that give him complementary insights into his subject matter. Assembling a transhistorical theatre troupe of designers, assistants, muses, and models that stage his garments, Michele's dramatic art is played out in a space that is a kaleidoscope of fourteenth century carnival masks, 1950s TV, and 1960s fashion futurism. Michele's impact and eclectic attitude, debuted in his fall 2015 Gucci menswear collection, a collection that reset Gucci's previous representations of the clothed male body, such as those of Tom Ford, evinced what we might call 'amodern' thinking, 'atheoretical' quirkiness, and 'acritical' vintage references: these were not the retrospective accoutrements of a concluded past where Gucci fashion once accurately signified people's socio-cultural identities but the contemporary accessories of an inconclusive yet simultaneous past, present, and future where Gucci antique rings, for example, now metaphorically represent people's socio-cultural desire for creativity and change. Michele, exploring his amodern and sometimes confusing 'theory' of Gucci fashion, is apparently less critical of other contemporary luxury fashion designers and brands and more positively interested in taking his inspiration from twentieth century luxury fashion design legends such as Piero Tosi, whose designs were responsible for the

appearance of Luchino Visconti's movies such as *Death in Venice* (1971). Michele's current fashion collections are, consequently, not simply displays on a runway but also masterclasses in how to produce one's own media reality through cinematic imagery. Correspondingly, in emphasising the different design effects of hairdressing, Michele's fashion collections simultaneously channel the modernism of writer Virginia Woolf's messy chignon and the embryonic 1970s postmodernism of rock star David Bowie's tidy mullet. Thus, Michele's contemporary style of creativity draws on a sensibility that can, for instance, be simultaneously literary and musical whilst also creating an ambiance that is less historical, critical, or imbued with a postmodern sense of creative afterness and more one that is eerie, unnerving, and, at times, undeniably spooky. Avoiding fashion theorising, Michele's new language of luxury fashion is therefore intentionally 'wrong', with his collections in some way 'contaminated', as if he is trying to uncover a sense of imperfection wherein the meaning of Gucci fashion for consumers is that it is 'wrong' but in the 'right' way.

Nonetheless, what is obvious is that Michele's role in the globalisation of Gucci fashion is important not because of his tenuous associations with postmodern discourses but because his contemporary look involves an attempt to incorporate 'old' information from film, TV and video into new technologies where his fashion design projects and runway shows become visual representations seen with different eyes. Certainly, one of the most striking elements of Michele's visual representations and fashion design is the near absence of references to the internet and social media in an era when, for young Gucci consumers, globalised forms of luxury fashion are the norm. This is not to suggest that Gucci the company is indifferent to internet and social media based digital initiatives. In fact, since 2016, Gucci has not only collaborated with Instagram and Snapchat artists but also launched 'do-it-yourself' consumer services.[38] Such services allow Gucci consumers to personalise selected products whilst Gucci's data science team has improved these services by assessing in real-time a 360-degree view of its consumers.[39] Yet, unlike Gucci's French multinational corporate owner, Kering, which is presently concerned with issues of sustainability and value, with production systems, shareholders, suppliers, and the consumers of its luxury products,[40] Michele, as Gucci's creative director, is understandably more exercised, and on his own admission, by the world of Peter Pan where free-spirited mischievousness and youth combine with adventures on mythical islands abounding with fairies, pirates, and mermaids.[41] Michele's personal discourse, unlike the homogenising discourse of globalisation, then, counters the

homogenised masses of world technoculture with global chic, with luxurious retro jewellery, and a form of glamour that spreads a heterogeneous visual culture of representation founded less on the established power of Facebook and more on the diminished power of American movie corporations. European cinema, too, and especially Rome's Cinecittà (where Michele's mother worked), is also a key constituent of Michele's global vision. Thus, although Gucci fashion goods may well be multinational corporate products where sales matter, what matters for Michele is American and European film. 'Italy's' Gucci, therefore, is increasingly less like a Florentine luxury fashion brand and more like a transnational casting agent that, in its contemporary advertising campaigns, features pan-generational American film actresses such as Faye Dunaway. What is now clear is that the modern history of Gucci fashion, of 1950s Cinecittà allure and 1960s Italian elegance, has always had important transnational dimensions which never were and never could be restricted to an imaginary model of undoubted Italian heritage, growth, and interaction. Modern Italian Gucci fashion designers such as Guccio, Aldo, and Rodolfo Gucci (all born in Italy), as we saw above, looked for times and locations of creativeness beyond Italy such as the US, an expanding country in the post Second World War era, and one whose luxury fashion was shaped in part by Gucci in the 1950s and 1960s. Inventing a lavish life and a fashion world not entirely shaped by Italy, the Gucci's established and promoted their clothing, accessories, and footwear (which featured in movies and lifestyle magazines in the 1950s with straplines such as: 'Quality is remembered long after price is forgotten'). Michele's conceptual continuations at Gucci are manifest: it is the already prevailing Italian shaping of Hollywood in its glory years through Gucci handbags and butterfly pattern silk foulards worn by American movie stars that today provides the settings and possibilities for Michele to idealise such legendary eras and scenes as depicted in 1950s Hollywood musicals as somewhere ostensibly outside of the recognised and progressively globalised world of luxury fashion dominated by the European luxury brands.

Conclusion

In this article we have seen how we can respond to the key concept of luxury by focusing critical attention on the study of fashion, particularly luxury fashion as it is defined in relation to lavishness and affluent living or settings. Unlike others concerned with the idea of luxury

fashion, we have viewed luxury fashion itself as a twenty-first century globalising medium and thus something which can communicate the social meaning of luxury culture. However, we remain conscious of the way art, craft, and even history can be and are absorbed by luxury fashion. Our argument concerning the globalisation of luxury fashion, therefore, eventuated in a case study of Gucci which, among other things, problematised the contemporary 'Italianness' of this luxury brand. The current condition of Gucci's history and profits, global branding and sales under Alessandro Michele's creative direction is, for us, something which strives for an authentic luxury fashion while knowing that both luxury and fashion, like many other concepts and practices, tend to be indiscriminatingly and atheoretically assimilated by and into the contemporary globalisation of everything.

Bibliography

Adorno, Theodor, *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture* (London: Routledge, 2001).

Armitage, John, *Luxury and Visual Culture* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).

Armitage, John, Joanne Roberts, and Yasmin Sekhon, 'Luxury Products and Services and the Sustainable Value Chain: Six Management Lessons from Gucci', in Miguel Angel Gardetti (ed.), *Sustainable Management of Luxury*, (New York: Springer, 2017), 259-279.

Asome, Carolyn, *Vogue on Jean-Paul Gaultier* (London: Quadrille Publishing, 2017).

Barnard, Malcolm, *Fashion Theory: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2014).

Bartlett, Djurdja, Shaun Cole, and Agnes Rocamora (eds.), *Fashion Media: Past and Present* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

Bell, Quentin, *On Human Finery* (London: Hogarth, 1976).

Bowles, Hamish, 'Inside the Wild World of Gucci's Alessandro Michele', *Vogue* April 15 (2019), 1-7: Accessed June 2020: https://www.vogue.com/article/gucci-alessandro-michele-interview-may-2019-issue

Burckhardt, Jacob, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (London: Penguin, 1991 [1929]).

Burke, Peter, *The Italian Renaissance: Culture and Society in Italy* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013).

Cox, Caroline, *Luxury Fashion: A Global History of Heritage Brands* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

Currie, Elizabeth, *A Cultural History of Dress and Fashion in the Renaissance* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).

Dalby, Andrew, *Empire of Pleasures: Luxury and Indulgence in the Roman World* (London: Routledge, 2000).

Deloitte, *Global Powers of Luxury Goods 2019* (London: Deloitte, 2020).

Duggan, Christopher, *A Concise History of Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

Ford, Tom, *Tom Ford* (New York: Rizzoli, 2017).

Forden, Sara, *House of Gucci: A Sensational Story of Murder, Madness, Glamour, and Greed* (New York: Custom House, 2002).

Geezy, Adam, and Millner, Jacqueline, *Fashionable Art* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

George, Adrian, *The Curator's Handbook: Museums, Commercial Galleries, Independent Spaces* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2015).

Giannini, Frida, *Gucci - The Making Of* (New York: Rizzoli, 2011).

Hecter, Michael, Lynn Nedel, and Richard Michod (eds.), *The Origin of Values* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1993).

Holgate, Mark, 'The Guccio Museo Opens in Florence', *Vogue*, September 27 (2011)1-5: Accessed June 2020: https://www.vogue.com/article/the-gucci-museo-opens-in-florence

Ilmakunnas, Johanna, and Jon Stobart (eds.) *A Taste for Luxury in Early Modern Europe: Display, Acquisition and Boundaries* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017).

Kering, ‘About Kering & key figures’, Kering. Accessed July 2020: https://www.kering.com/en/finance/about-kering/

Mauriès, Patrick, *Chanel: The Karl Lagerfeld Campaigns* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2018).

Menkes, Suzy, ‘Gucci’s Secret Weapon: A School for Craft, Technology, and Passion’, *Vogue*, November 13 (2018) 1-4: Accessed June 2020: https://www.vogue.co.uk/article/guccis-secret-weapon-a-school-for-craft-technology-and-passion

Menkes, Suzy, *Yves Saint Laurent: The Complete Haute Couture Collections 1962-2002* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2019).

Ormen, Catherine, *All About Yves* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2017).

Pieterse, Jan Nederveen, *Globalization and Culture* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019).

Schwartzwald, Jack, *The Rise of the Nation-State in Europe* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2017).

Simmel, Georg, *The Art of the City: Rome, Florence, Venice* (London: Pushkin, 2018).

Watt, Judith, *Alexander McQueen* (London: Goodman Books, 2019).

Welters, Linda, and Abby Lillethun, *Fashion History: A Global View* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018).

Zazzo, Anne, and Olivier Saillard, *Paris Haute Couture* (Paris: Flammarion, 2019).

Zwart de, Pim, and Jan Luiten van Zanden, *The Origins of Globalization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

Notes

[1] Cox, *Luxury Fashion*

[2] Bell, *On Human Finery*, 1976: 44.

[3] Watt, *Alexander McQueen*, 2019.

[4] Asome, *Vogue on Jean-Paul Gaultier*, 2017.

[5] Armitage, *Luxury and Visual Culture*, 2020.

[6] Zazzo and Saillard, *Paris Haute Couture*, 2013.

[7] Mauriès, *Chanel: The Karl Lagerfeld Campaigns*, 2018.

[8] Adorno, *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, 2001.

[9] Hecter, Nedel, and Michod, *The Origin of Values*,1993.

[10] Menkes, *Yves Saint Laurent: The Complete Haute Couture Collections 1962-2002*, 2019.

[11] de Zwart and Luiten, *The Origins of Globalization*, 2018; Ilmakunnas and Stobart, *A Taste for Luxury in Early Modern Europe: Display, Acquisition and Boundaries*, 2017)

[12] Welters and Lillethun, *Fashion History: A Global View*, 2018.

[13] Dalby, *Empire of Pleasures: Luxury and Indulgence in the Roman World*, 2000: 268-269.

[14] Schwartzwald, *The Rise of the Nation-State in Europe*, 2017.

[15] George, *The Curator's Handbook: Museums, Commercial Galleries, Independent Spaces*, 2015.

[16] Bartlett, Cole, and Rocamora, *Fashion Media: Past and Present*, 2013.

[17] Armitage, *Luxury and Visual Culture*, 2020: 37-66.

[18] Geezy and Millner, *Fashionable Art*, 2015.

[19] Burke, *The Italian Renaissance: Culture and Society in Italy*, 2013.

[20] Currie, *A Cultural History of Dress and Fashion in the Renaissance*, 2016.

[21] Duggan, *A Concise History of Italy*, 2013.

[22] Burckhardt, *The Civilisation of the Renaissance in Italy*, 1991 [1929].

[23] Simmel, *The Art of the City: Rome, Florence, Venice*, 2018.

[24] Barnard, *Fashion Theory: An Introduction*, 2014: 152-160.

[25] Armitage, *Luxury and Visual Culture*, 2020.

[26] Pieterse, *Globalization and Culture*, 2019.

[27] Deloitte, *Global Powers of Luxury Goods 2019*, 2020.

[28] Ormen, *All About Yves,* 2017.

[29] Giannini, *Gucci - The Making Of,* 2001; Forden, *House of Gucci: A Sensational Story of Murder, Madness, Glamour, and Greed,* 2002.

[30] Kering, 'About Kering & key figures', 2020.

[31] Forden, *House of Gucci: A Sensational Story of Murder, Madness, Glamour, and Greed,* 2002.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Holgate, 'The Guccio Museo Opens in Florence', *Vogue,* 2011: 1-5.

[34] Menkes, 'Gucci's Secret Weapon: A School for Craft, Technology, and Passion', *Vogue,* 2018: 1-4.

[35] Bowles, 'Inside the Wild World of Gucci's Alessandro Michele', *Vogue,* 2019: 1-7.

[36] Ford, *Tom Ford,* 2017.

[37] Deloitte, *Global Powers of Luxury Goods 2019,* 2020.

[38] Ibid.

[39] Ibid.

[40] Armitage, Roberts, and Sekhon, 'Luxury Products and Services and the Sustainable Value Chain: Six Management Lessons from Gucci', 2017: 259-279)

[41] Bowles 'Inside the Wild World of Gucci's Alessandro Michele', *Vogue,* 2019, 1-7: 6.