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Fashion as a Narrative System: A Decolonial Approach.

By Teresa Berkhout Garcia

Supervisor: Isabel Alonso Breto.

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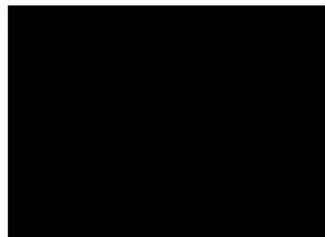


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Barcelona, a 19 de Juny del 2023

Signatura:



In loving memory of my three grandmothers.

My Oma, Anne, a seamstress for Oilily, and a reminder that sometimes a common language is not a prerequisite for love.

My yaya Maria, an amateur dressmaker, and a reminder that a common blood is also not a prerequisite for love.

And finally, my dear grandmother Teresa, who I never met, but I carry her name, humor, and elegance everywhere with me.

Thanks to these three women for showing me that heritage, culture, and history can fashion a person so distinctively.

En memòria de les meves tres àvies.

La meva Oma, Anne, costurera per a Oilily, i un recordatori que de vegades un llenguatge comú no és un requisit previ per a l'amor.

La meva iaia Maria, una aficionada modista, i un recordatori que una sang comuna tampoc és un requisit previ per a l'amor.

I finalment, la meva adorada àvia Teresa, a qui mai vaig conèixer, però porto el seu nom, humor i elegància amb mi a tot arreu.

Gràcies a aquestes tres dones, per mostrar-me que l'herència, la cultura i la història poden vestir a una persona tan distintivament.

Paraules Clau:

Literatura, Moda, Semiòtica, Decolonialisme, Àfrica, Narratologia.

Resum:

Aquest article examina com funciona la moda com a sistema narratiu i com es pot utilitzar com a eina per a la narració, així com per explorar temes tan complexos com la decolonialitat. Advoca per la democratització de l'art i la cultura mitjançant la vinculació dels temes de moda amb el que concerneix l'individu comú. La decolonialitat de la moda es discuteix amb l'ajuda de la teoria semiòtica i decolonial, així com analitzant el treball de creatius i dissenyadors africans.

Incorporant idees de la semiòtica de la moda –i l'obra de Roland Barthes– i de teòrics decolonialistes com Walter Mignolo, aquest article pretén defensar la moda com un sistema narratiu fort que manté la capacitat de conversar amb diversos camps acadèmics. El text emfatitza dissenyadors i marques, com Wanda Lephoto, que representen missatges importants a través de la moda. Finalment, aconsegueix la seva intenció d'aprofundir en els materials per transmetre una idea de l'estat de la conversa decolonial en el món de la moda.

Keywords:

Literature, Fashion, Semiotics, Decoloniality, Africa, Narratology.

Abstract:

This paper examines how fashion works as a narrative system and how it can be used as a tool for storytelling, as well as to explore issues as complex as decolonialization. It advocates for the democratization of art and culture by linking fashion themes to what concerns the common individual. Fashion decolonialization is discussed with the help of semiotic and decolonial theory, as well as by analysing the work of African creatives and designers.

Incorporating ideas from fashion semiotics –and the work of Roland Barthes– and from decolonial theorist like Walter Mignolo, this paper intends to defend fashion as a strong narrative system that holds the ability to converse with diverse academic fields. The text emphasizes the work of designers and brands, like Wanda Lephoto, that represent important messages through fashion. Ultimately it achieves its intention to delve into the materials to convey an idea of the state of the decolonial conversation in the fashion world.

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1. INTRODUCTION

*Unto Adam also and to his wife did the Lord God
make coats of skins, and clothed them.*
- Genesis (III,21)

Fashion needs to be respected as a valid narrative system; that respect is imperative, and that validity is a fact. The influence fashion currently has on society and our culture is undeniable, but the scope of its constant effect is often ignored. It is true that Fashion Studies and Fashion history are an existing niche within academia, and often converse with fields as varied as sociology, linguistics, design, economics, and literature, but they are not contemplated as equals. Fashion is a poorly understood part of culture and life. Fashion is regarded as superficial, fashion is for the rich and for the skinny, and fashion is something gendered that interests only women and gender non-conforming people. These are some of the common assumptions impacting the concept we have of fashion. Therefore, fashion is, more often than not, not taken seriously. The context of this problem includes the perpetuation of the class divide when it comes to culture and the inaccessibility of the arts to the average person. But fashion is not only a form of self-expression, it is also a form of storytelling with the power of influencing the masses. Thus, the democratisation of fashion and its study in relation to societal and cultural issues is critical. Consequently, the motivation behind this paper is, in a way, years of witnessing how fashion is regarded as a superficial topic and not worthy of academic importance, even within the fields of the arts and humanities.

The idea to connect the main statement in this paper, namely, that fashion is a valid narrative system, to the perspectives and approaches of Decolonial critique, seemed natural, since the perspective has shifted towards the possibilities of fashion to tell political and cultural-defying stories. Perhaps fashion is a motor for change, thus, this paper intends to prove the relation of fashion to cultural movements, and how it is a system of narration powerful enough to represent ideas currently being developed within the domains of academia.

The world around us and the world of fashion are undeniably intertwined. When we look at a piece of art, a text or a film, we look for a common thread that guides our understanding through that narrative; fashion can be read similarly. This paper defends that fashion is as valid a narrative system as the previously mentioned models, and that it is a language of its own. Clothes can provide an artistic representation of a story that can draw from fiction and reality the most intricate of political messages. Therefore, fashion is a strong

narrative system fit to represent cultural concerns and converse with literary works, as it is also a language used every day to express ourselves, even if we are not aware of it.

Furthermore, this paper intends to engage in the critical analysis of a cultural phenomenon: the African and African-diaspora's persistence to tell a story – in this case, through fashion–. The research has mainly sprouted from two fields of study, Semiotics and Decolonial Studies. Since the main objective was to prove the validity of fashion to express intricate ideas, they seemed a fitting frame to both create a strong foundation for and build upon the main thesis. As the paper progresses, the thesis progresses into Africa as a main cultural field in which to discuss the phenomenon of narrative fashion. More specifically, it focuses on the work of South-African designer Wanda Lepoto and their homonymous brand. through the case-study of a few pieces from varied collections that aligned with the purpose of this paper.

While part of the motivation behind this paper was the frustration of witnessing that fashion is not taken seriously, it is this same “unseriousness” and disregard that permits fashion to be a “safe haven”. For the marginalized and the minorities, the act of hiding behind clothes or expressing through clothes is a way of communication that might not be actively regulated by society. This concealment of the person is a characterization of the self, a creation of an autobiographical narrative, a self-portrait come to life. Therefore, the central questions this research pursued became an intertwined duo: whether fashion is a language capable of communication and a valid narrative system; and whether this can be a tool for representation, powerful enough to give space to and make space for the Other. Thus, the second fundamental thesis that we shall be defending is that fashion is political, and fashion is the ideal medium for the otherized subject or communities.

2. METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL FRAMES

In short, the woman who wears fashion finds herself asked four questions:

Who? What? When? Where?

Her utopian garment always answers at least one of these questions.

- Roland Barthes

This paper intends to draw knowledge from different fields of study to ultimately read and treat fashion as a productive object of academic research. As stated above the initial perspective is to prove that fashion is a useful tool for storytelling and can express ideas that motivate change, as well as make statements that purposefully inspire cultural movements. For this reason, the first approach was to examine fashion as a language and as a narrative system, more specifically, a semiological system. Semiotics, overall, is the study of signs; just as we can interpret signs and construct meaning from text, we can also construct meaning from visual images like fashion and dress. Thereupon, fashion-applied semiotics is the study of fashion and of how humans signify specific social and cultural motives through the art of dress. The semiotics of fashion, as Barthes stated, is concerned with the circulation of fashion as a meaning: “This is the case, for instance, with the fashion magazine which ‘speaks’ the significations of garments, just as one speaks a language; language, at its denoted level, is a metalanguage” (1964, p.92). By non-verbally showcasing the meaning and stories behind individuals and groups, fashion is a language of signs. And having the capacity to express one's unique style, identity, profession, social status, and gender or group affiliations, fashion also holds a symbolic and communicative role.

In such manner, narratology and semiotics were chosen organically, since they were fields widely mentioned in the reading done prior to the beginning of the research. A narrative system is what we perceive as a functional structure that tells or perpetuates a story. Narratology is the study of these narrative structures, and it is founded on the notion of a universal literary language, or a pattern of codes, that operates within the text of a work –much like structuralism and semiotics, from which it developed–. Its theoretical foundation is the creation and communication of narratives across a wide range of media, including oral and written language, music, and fashion. Both fields, semiology and narratology, are useful

because they expand on the notions that we have on narrative and language and give many examples applicable to not only the fashion system, but the *garment* system¹.

The fashion system is studied and represented as unattainable and distant to the common individual, and this is not entirely accurate. Even if said distance is truthfully being enforced by the fashion sphere, communities have constantly used fashion as a narrative tool. The research hopes to consign that the political narrative being expressed through fashion is worthy of exploring and discussing in connection with the study of English Literature and the connected cultures, and overall, the study of fashion could be useful in various levels of our education.

Therefore, the decolonial approach was chosen as well, following the growth of a political motivation with the investigation of current fashion-related affairs. For instance, the garment industry is involved in the demanding conversations around sustainability, ethical production, globalization, racism, sexism, and other types of isms. The cultural figure once coined as the “Other” has always been crucial to fashion excellence and innovation, and it could be said that the most exciting things happening today, not only in the industry but in the creative fields around this art, are coming from African or diasporic creators and researchers, who have been widely “othered” in their fields. In a way, this comes as a challenge because of the constant colonial undertone of many academic materials that unintentionally follow the status quo left by these systems, but there is an ambition to decentre or dismantle dominant colonial attitudes and power structures in contemporary fashion spaces, and ultimately in this paper. Fundamentally, decoloniality was chosen as the frame of reference of the analysis because of its implications in democratizing culture and taking a stance to rediscover, revalidate, and restore knowledges, cultural values, social and economic structures that have been displaced or suppressed by colonialism, and because of how critical these implications are.

¹ The fashion system represents here the various industries, businesses, and processes involved in the creation, production, and marketing of clothing and accessories. Contrastively, the *garment* system is a semiological concept in Barthes’ theory that will be later explained.

2.1 Semiotics and Narratology: Fashion in conversation with Linguistics

From runway collections or displays of couture like The MET Gala², to prêt-à-porter basics, the ideas inspired by clothing can determine how we treat or deem a person, and what we associate with their inner-most self. Fashion has a meaning, even in the most casual of pieces, and it reflects it via the signs we can read from the garment. Like encoding and decoding a message, dressing and undressing can express this dichotomy. Semiotics is the systematic study of sign processes and meaning making, which can be intentional or unintentional, like dress. Unlike linguistics, semiotics also studies non-linguistic sign systems, like fashion.

Ferdinand de Saussure created semiotics as a new field concerned with the study of communication, which he called semiology (from the Greek semeion, ‘sign’). This science that studied the role of signs as part of our social existence, their nature and the laws that govern this world, is connected to linguistics, and therefore, to philology. Later, other branches emerged, like cultural and literary semiotics, concerned with the literary world, visual media, and advertising; this is where Roland Barthes comes in. Barthes was a French literary theorist and semiotician from the 20th century. Alongside social semiotics, which expands on the interpretation of signs to include all cultural codes, from slang and tattoos to fashion, Roland Barthes focused his study on these fields and wrote *Elements of Semiology* and *The Fashion System*. He would often critique pieces of media or culture to manifest how bourgeois society used them to impose its values upon others; this ambition is connected to this paper’s implication in decolonial approaches to culture and the democratization of the arts.

Inasmuch as all these branches of semiotics are pertinent, narratology –the study of narratives and their structures, and how they are perceived– and cognitive narratology –as a more recent development– allow for a broader understanding of the narratives. Rather than focus on the structure of the story, cognitive narratology asks how humans perceive stories and how humans use stories as valuable tools. And as a semiotic discipline, it is similarly concerned with communication and the reception of narratives.

Still, the texts and ideas from the study of semiotics in the 1960s by Roland Barthes and his observations of the “garment system” were essential to back up, parallel to linguistics, the more literary and cultural approach of this paper. As Barthes expresses in *Elements of*

² On the first Monday of May, fashion communities instigate a discussion around the outfits and style choices made by celebrities and other fashion personalities at the annual MET Gala. This event funds the Metropolitan Museum of Arts’ Costume Institute, in New York. This event has a yearly theme, a designated narrative. This showcases how, even in the mainstream, we often read and discuss the meaning and messages behind fashion.

Semiology (1964), semiotics can be divided into three major fields of study. First, the study of the sign itself examines the many ways in which a sign communicates meaning as well as how it relates to the people who construct and use it. This paper will analyse the signs and their meaning drawn from a specific set of pieces, and the designer who “constructed” them. Second, the study of the codes or systems into which signs are organized explains how various codes have evolved to fulfil the needs of a society or culture; in this sense, this paper will show that the colonial status quo in the fashion system establishes these organized codes that fulfil the needs of certain parts of society. Third, the study of the culture within which these systems operate investigates how members of a society use certain signs; thus, here we shall explore how the fashion system exists within a globalized culture and this affects the implied meaning of the garments. In *Elements of Semiology*, Roland Barthes states that “objects, images and patterns of behaviour can signify and do so on a large scale, but never autonomously; every semiological system has its linguistic admixture” (1964, p.10).

Therefore, fashion can and should be read alongside a linguistic frame. Barthes continues to defend that clothes “enjoy the status of systems only in so far as they pass through the relay of language, which extracts their signifiers (in the form of nomenclature) and names their signifieds (in the forms of usages or reasons.)” (1964, p.10). This implies that fashion has an inherent meaning, and storytelling through fashion solidifies this connection of language through the material. This is one of the reasons why semiology was chosen as a theoretical frame for this research, because the materials are realized in so far as they are spoken, “through the press, prospectus, interview, conversation and perhaps even the inner language of fashion creatives, ruled by the laws of imagination” (Barthes, 1964, p.11).

The designer’s narrative is an inner world ruled by these same laws of imagination and shared through fashion as a language that expresses their ideas and *ideals*. In *The Fashion System*, Barthes attempts to study sign systems beyond language and literature by investigating fashion; he examines the language of fashion and defines it as “written clothing” (1983, p.4). For this analysis, he uses the differentiation between the *vestmentary code*—that is the system of fashion elements and rules—, and *garments*—how the code is individually expressed—.

These ideas culminate in what Barthes coins as the garment system, which is an example of both language and a radical form of speech, and it possesses various forms of representation, which in clothes (as worn) exemplifies the classic distinction between language and speech. The language, in the garment system, is made by the oppositions of pieces, parts of the garment and details; the variation of these entail a change in meaning, according to the rules which govern the association of the pieces among themselves, either on the length of the

body or in depth. For example, a different pattern on the same wax-fabric, even cut into the same dress shape-wise, is a variation powerful enough to entail a change in the meaning of the garment. And speech, in the garment system, comprises the individual way of wearing: the size of the garment, degree of cleanliness or wear, personal quirks, free association of pieces, etc. (Barthes, 1964).

Nevertheless, Barthes (1964) continues that in clothes (as written about) “described in a fashion magazine by means of articulated language, there is practically no ‘speech’: the garment which is described never corresponds to an individual handling of the rules of fashion, it is a systematized set of signs and rules: it is a language in its pure state” (p.26). He follows that according to the Saussurean schema, “a language without a speech would be impossible; what makes the fact acceptable here is, on the one hand, that the language of fashion does not emanate from the ‘speaking mass’ but from a group which makes the decisions and deliberately elaborates the code” (Barthes, 1964, p.26).

Barthes exposes here and in other statements of *Elements of Semiology* the fragmentation and hierarchization of the cultural world and society, by discussing how fashion and its signs are set by the particular frame of a collective of people. This statement is remindful of the renowned monologue Meryl Streep performs in the fashion classic film *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006), which exposes the inner workings of the industry through the story of Andrea – the character played by Anne Hathaway–, an unknowledgeable assistant to the editor-in-chief of a fashion magazine.

In this single scene, Miranda Priestly –the character played by Meryl Streep– succinctly tells how fashion is to be taken seriously with the following memorable speech:

This stuff? Oh, okay. I see, you think this has nothing to do with you. You go to your closet, and you select out, oh, I don’t know, that lumpy blue sweater, for instance, because you’re trying to tell the world that you take yourself too seriously to care about what you put on your back.

But what you don’t know is that that sweater is not just blue, it’s not turquoise, it’s not lapis, it’s actually cerulean. You’re also blindly unaware of the fact that in 2002, Oscar de la Renta did a collection of cerulean gowns. And then I think it was Yves Saint Laurent, wasn’t it, who showed cerulean military jackets? And then cerulean quickly showed up in the collections of eight different designers. Then it filtered down through the department stores and then trickled on down into some tragic 'casual corner' where you, no doubt, fished it out of some clearance bin.

However, that blue represents millions of dollars and countless jobs and so it's sort of comical how you think that you've made a choice that exempts you from the fashion industry when, in fact, you're wearing sweater that was selected for you by the people in this room. From a pile of stuff.

(Brosh McKenna, 2005)

Moreover, this soliloquy, besides exposing the inner workings of the fashion industry, fitly addresses the issue with cultural appropriation in the fashion world, as pointed out by Rachel Lubitz in the article "How, In One Monologue, 'The Devil Wears Prada' Nailed the Cultural Appropriation Issue". Cultural Appropriation is the unrecognized or improper adoption of a people's customs, practices, or ideas by members of another, usually more dominant, community. Priestly points out that an ignorant immersion in an industry or culture is more a mockery than an embrace of said culture, and that learning its history is paramount. "What Priestley is doing, essentially, is exposing how dismissive and unknowledgeable Andy is of the culture she's taking part in — a culture that she previously viewed as frivolous" (Lubitz, 2016).

This same dismissiveness and unknowing of a culture while taking aspects from it is what cultural appropriation signifies; ignoring an entire, elaborate cultural history —much like Andy ignoring the elaborate history of the fashion industry—. Streep's character implies that it is because of the work done by other people that this piece is even being worn by the protagonist. After all, in fashion —via its meaning-making illustrated by semiotics, or by its cultural weight— a blue sweater is not just a blue sweater, but the result of many different people working relentlessly. The famous scene subsequently exemplifies how every garment has a story, thus agreeing with the previous semiological discourse.

2.2 *The Decolonial Approach: Fashion and Politics*

Decolonial Studies and their related forms strive to disengage from Eurocentric knowledge hierarchies, and ways of being in the world, to permit other forms of existence on our planet. It challenges the notions that Western knowledge is universal, and that Western culture is superior, as well as the institutions and processes that support these notions. Decolonial approaches see colonialism as the foundation upon which imperialism and modern capitalism operate daily. To overcome the perceived constraints of the Western canons of knowledge, there is a need for the decolonization of various academic disciplines.

Fashion has always been concerned with and created by the people on the margins. This may come as a surprise, especially after previously mentioning the elite that controls the fashion industry; but at its core, the artistic and cultural movement that fashion represents has sprouted from marginalized communities, queer people, and what was once coined as “the exotic”. A great example of this is how an array of fashion trends and movements originate from lower-class, racialized, and other underrepresented communities. From the punk that influenced Vivienne Westwood and everything she represents to the extensive influence of black culture on the world of fashion. A wide ambition to reclaim the centre of the narrative in the fashion world exists, and it is supported by new generations of designers, researchers, journalists, editors, models, and stylists. Fashion can be a tool to deconstruct the colonial matrix of power³, but connections must be drawn from the decolonial academic fields to be applied to the reality of fashion-led activism. Actions like creating a third space⁴ as a radical decolonial act, instead of following the fixation on fashion capitals, can be supported by assertive fashion design that decentralizes the narrative to represent indigenous identities.

Many believe that fashion should proceed in this same direction. The question lies in how fashion can be successfully decolonized, or if its history and current culture can be rethought. There is also concern around whether this trend is an honourable attempt at a much-needed diversification of fashion narratives, or another example of the West mistakenly imposing its own narrative on what was deemed as the “Other”.

Fashion, as the billion-dollar industry and not the art form or cultural tool, derives from historical European aristocratic culture and its heteronormative, dominant views of social

³ Concept developed by Anibal Quijano in ‘*Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism and Latin America*’ (2000). It represents the geographical, political, and onto-epistemological extension of western domination, through four interrelated domains: economy, authority, gender/sexuality, and knowledge.

⁴ Term/concept attributed to Homi Bhabha in the context of postcolonial sociolinguistics, although popular in Decoloniality to address the spaces created between cultural meetings in which to converse towards liberation.

progress. Consequently, it followed evolutions such as sexual liberation and modernity from a very Westernized point of view. Its imaginations of other continents were often a process of exotification and fetishization; not the fluid and horizontal multiculturalism alternative fashion spaces often explored. Fashion history reveals a long tradition of approximate citations and appropriations that say more about how the West wanted to see itself than about the cultures they were appropriating from (Pfeiffer, 2018) as illustrated by Elsa Schiaparelli's fascination for "the exotic body"⁵, and many more examples. This is highly reminiscent of Edward Said ideas in *Orientalism* (1978), which discuss the prejudice and many disrespectful depictions and portrayal of the East by academics, and the influence it has had in broader culture and media.

Throughout the 20th century, Yves Saint Laurent's frequent trips to Morocco led him to design Sahariennes, loose, pocketed, sand-coloured outfits imagined for trips in the Sahara; John Galliano recreated Geisha makeup on models, and Jean Paul Gaultier presented an African Collection in 2005 that Vogue described at the time as "having more to do with rumba than Rwanda."

(Pfeiffer 2018)

With countless examples, cultural appropriation seems to perform in an unbreakable cycle –as previously mentioned in relation to "The Devil Wears Prada" (2006) monologue–. We are becoming increasingly aware of cultural appropriation, and fashion houses targeting a worldwide youth are following suit strategizing around the issue; but most importantly, there is a real shift in academia to include fashion in these conversations. Fashion both currently and historically should be rethought, deconstructed, and re-evaluated to decolonize its imagination; this is being sustained by the fashion community and there seems to be an abounding of rethinking, deconstructing, and re-evaluating.

To further explore the value of fashion in academics, and in relation to the decolonial matter, there are a few names of scholars and projects worth mentioning. The Argentinian theorist Walter D. Mignolo is a scholar and semiotician who published extensively on semiotics –which is one of the theoretical frames of this paper– and literary theory. Mignolo has also worked on different aspects of the modern and colonial world. Being one of the first to explore the concept of decoloniality, Mignolo has written extensively on "decolonial aesthetics". In relation to this, Erica de Greef –a researcher, curator, and co-director of the African Fashion

⁵ This can be seen in the discussion Schiaparelli and Miuccia Prada had for the Vogue series *Impossible Conversations* (2012); https://youtu.be/bC_FgpJejul

Research Institute, whose work encompasses decolonized fashion narratives—, Angela Jansen—a decolonial researcher, educator, consultant, curator, and director of the Research Collective for Decoloniality & Fashion— and Shayna Stephanie Goncalves—a South African professor in the Art History department at Parsons-The New School for Design— conversed with Mignolo on the second edition of “Conversations on Decoloniality and Fashion”, a research collective that explores these intertwined ideas. Goncalves (2021) writes of this meeting that, as a participant, she was “wary of the term decoloniality, with its comparative degrees decolonize and decolonizing, becoming quite quickly subsumed by academic discourse, Contemporary Fashion and pop culture”. Mignolo discusses the very complexity of doing decoloniality, especially so in an ever-evolving field like fashion. So, while “decolonize, decolonizing, and decoloniality” are currently trending, there is a danger that decoloniality soon too will be out of style and we will go back to ‘the normal’: coloniality and the Western perspective as the standard. The discussion concludes that “to undo toxic normals upheld by coloniality/modernity we need to integrate new forms, values, ideals, and habits into the normal.” Mignolo adds that “in order to erode that narrative, you have to dupe another narrative” (Goncalves, 2021).

That is what Decoloniality stands for in this paper; to replace those traditional elitist understandings of fashion with the work of indigenous and once-marginalized designers and create an academic space to discuss their work. Undoubtedly, there has been criticism around the increased global exposure on fashion from Africa, and this is creating new stereotypes about the continent and a commodifying identity. South-African designer Wanda Lephoto thinks that right now designers are “negotiating a space where they can compete alongside the West without losing their identity, but with an eye on the commerce side of things. That space must exist sustainably for a business to grow within Africa and be taken abroad without having to negotiate too much with the West and giving it all away” (Lephoto, 2021). Therefore, where African fashion is heading and how it is negotiating its identity in this globalized context is an important matter for the fashion world.

3. ANALYSIS

3.1 The 21st Century: Fashion's Past and Future

For Europeans, the rest of the world never reached the state of producing art, literature, or fashion; it is stuck producing 'arts-crafts,' 'myths' and 'costume.

- Angela Jansen

The future of fashion is the future of our planet. The imminent impact of climate change, social injustices and unrest, and globalization –which has perpetuated some of the worst practices of previous centuries– are perhaps the main motivators currently for both the creation of art and of social movements. In a way it is almost traditional to find that art flourishes from spaces of transgression and discomfort. Fashion is part of this same stream of progressive creations that critique our current living standards but may also build towards a more sustainable future –in all the meanings of the word.

The industry and the craft of fashion have seemingly shifted in the last decades towards a more inclusive, sustainable, and ethical approach corresponding to the events and demands of contemporary times. This is not to say that the big machine that is the industry of luxury and *prêt-à-porter*⁶ fashion is being deconstructed and reconstructed to fit into the demands and ideals of the average consumer, but they are conceivably acting like it. Market giants are profiting of the concerns and actual necessities of not only the people but our home planet, through corrupt and deceiving practices like *greenwashing*,⁷ but also through the beneficial inclusion of new minds and discourses. As previously mentioned by Walter Mignolo in the discussion about “Conversations of Decoloniality and Fashion”, we have to come to terms with the idea that decoloniality, when related to economic production, might go hand in hand with corrupt interest and misleading procedures.

The 21st century has seen the gradual and still ongoing introduction of decolonial approaches to many frameworks, and that includes the fashion creative scene and the fashion industry. Decolonizing fashion entails not only defying ‘the white man’s gaze’.⁸ But while

⁶ According to the *Cambridge Advanced Learners' Dictionary*, the meaning of *prêt-à-porter* is “(also ready-to-wear) (of clothes) produced in standard sizes and not made to fit a particular person”. (2023)

⁷ According to the *Cambridge Advanced Learners' Dictionary* the meaning of *Greenwashing* is “behavior or activities that make people believe that a company is doing more to protect the environment than it really is.” (2023)

⁸ The white gaze is a term popularized by critically acclaimed writer Toni Morrison. When describing how it operates, Morrison said that it's this idea that “[Black] lives have no meaning and no depth without the white gaze” (Toni Morrison: *The Pieces I Am*, 2019)

European designers are rarely questioned about their references to their national or cultural identities, fashion designers outside of the traditional fashion capitals are frequently judged based on the references they make to and their cultural identity. Rethinking the globalization of fashion is important, since the west has convinced itself that cultural interconnectedness only exists in this part of the hemisphere. This is what Angela Jansen, a fashion anthropologist based in Belgium, explains in her text *Decolonising Fashion* (2019), which develops the previous ideas to explain the context of African Fashion today.

Whether it be wax fabrics for African designers, or minimalism for Asian designers, these style expectations are not only a persistent legacy of Eurocentric imperialist thinking, but also a persistent method to distinguish, downplay, and exclude "Other" fashions from the predominately Eurocentric fashion discourse. Colonised societies and cultures were defined by the west as maintaining traditional, authentic, and "ancestral" ways and traditions, to emphasise a difference with European society and culture. Colonial administrators recorded the indigenous culture, orientalisng and folkorizing it as was relevant to them, and ignored the indigenous vibrant, dynamic, and sometimes internationally intertwined fashion histories. The decolonial concern around fashion is interested on the issue raised on these once colonized areas, after gaining independence and forming nation-states for the first time and discovering a need for a distinct sense of national identity. Ironically, Jansen states, this colonial heritage gave post-colonial nationalist movements a foundation for a "cultural legacy upon which to build distinctive and unique national identities, allowing them to clearly distinguish themselves from foreign oppressors" (2019). By choosing certain garments, patterns, and materials as symbols of national identity, and deliberately omitting others, nationalists erase multiple regional differences and historical power relations in the name of national unity, wiping out complex historiographical diversity. And consequently, the same prejudices introduced by colonizers to justify their own modernity and superiority are being now reproduced.

Simultaneously, referencing cultural identity by using "stereotypical" cultural heritage has developed into a crucial marketing strategy for fashion designers outside of the recognized fashion capitals. To create "different and unique" design identities, these designers have been drawing inspiration from their cultural backgrounds. Jansen (2019) notices in the article that they have been especially introducing textiles and decoration techniques that were previously used in 'traditional' objects like religious items and/or rural clothing of specific regions, because of their association with "tradition or authenticity" and therefore considered more "exotic, different, and unique". Although all designers, including those from Europe, make

conscious or unconscious references to their cultural identities in their works, only those who work outside of the established fashion capitals are given this treatment to distinguish and exclude them from mainstream fashion.

According to Walter D. Mignolo and Rolando Vazquez, "(Euro)modern aesthetics have played a key role in configuring a canon, a normativity that enabled the disdain and rejection of other forms of aesthetic practices" (2013). Self-orientalization or self-exoticization is a potent marketing strategy that is effective on both a national and international scale. Nationally, it has made it possible for designers to compete with international fashion because it satisfies consumer demands for locality that foreign brands are unable to satisfy, while internationally, it satisfies demand for the exotic or unusual associated with the designer's country of origin. This practice, though, also puts designers in a difficult position because their marketability comes from being associated with cultural diversity, but that same cultural diversity prevents them from fully belonging to the universal fashion community, which is made up of designers who claim to transcend the creative limitations of a single cultural tradition. Therefore, decolonizing fashion also entails destroying the Eurocentric cultural philosophy, whereby European fashion continues to be "the norm" and "Other" fashions are still seen as such. (Jansen, 2019)

3.1.1 The Role of Social Media

As a new century begins, concerned sectors of society and scholars are trying to lay a foundation and redirect the efforts towards an effective re-education of the mainstream. Social Media has undeniably been a most useful tool for educational purposes, and for reaching a wide audience with hardly any limitations. The impact of social media on the fashion industry, and the role of influencers on perpetuating trends is undeniable. *The New York Times*⁹ exemplifies in an article from 2021 how these last decades the fashion world has been promising to itself an increase of diversity; and this pledge can also be followed through with social media, where many creatives are addressing this issue and their individual decolonizing efforts. Like the article written by Friedman et al. (2021) argues, in an industry where black and indigenous representation has been rare and amid a flurry of racist incidents in the fashion industry, the fashion world promised it would change. Nevertheless, the article states that there are concrete numbers about who gets to make fashion, sell fashion, and represent fashion; and

⁹ To know more about the outcome and numbers of the investigation check the following: *The Fashion World Promised More Diversity. Here's What We Found* (2021) <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/04/style/Black-representation-fashion.html>

it converges in-depth investigations on the actual numbers and percentages on (mainly) African American representation in the fashion industry (which is still rooted in the West but represents a global diversity, nonetheless). Unsurprisingly, the data and the information comes down to an undeniable fact: we still have a long way to go.

Social media has made it straightforward for people of all different backgrounds (and body types) to find representation and feel included within the world of fashion, by giving people a platform to share their own sense of style and connect with others by sharing their preferences. But to decolonize fashion is also to decolonize social media. When it comes to the power structure of established brands, and the designers who represent them, the diversity of representation is incredibly small. In the investigation, the mentions by *The New York Times* on the inclusion of Latinx, Asian and other cultural and ethnic backgrounds also enlighten us on the state of fashion's decolonizing efforts. Contrastively, the Instagram page *Decolonized*¹⁰ aims to decolonize our consumption, that has been inflamed by the burst of the internet and social media, and to empower African communities and creators (also in the fashion field). They not only promote and market brands but share videos and discussions on the topic of decoloniality, and it is an interesting example of individual efforts that cater to a real excitement around the topic. Likewise, in the popular video-sharing platform TikTok, viewers have watched content with the #decolonization hashtag almost 50 million times (at the time of this paper), the themes of which are wide-ranging.

Still, while social media content does not carry the prestige and credit of traditional media, the influx of messages and influential materials introduced to each one of us through the internet is a useful tool to extend the accessibility of decolonial critique. Social media has additionally made it possible for a wider range of voices and perspectives to be heard in the fashion industry and has given people the chance to share their own distinctive styles and contribute to determining the direction of the industry, as opposed to relying solely on traditional fashion media outlets to determine what is fashionable and what is not. Decolonizing is to recognize the ways colonial power still operates today, and to advocate for Indigenous autonomy and to examine the ways in which colonialism, which emphasizes individuality and the exploitation of labour and resources, has shaped not just our political and economic systems, but also our way of consuming and being in the world.

¹⁰ To know more about the page and its background check the *Decolonized* account on the Instagram app or webpage: <https://www.instagram.com/decolonizd/>

3.2 The African Design Context

Contemporary writing about fashion on the continent was so absent. The need to decolonize fashion studies was necessary 20 years ago. It still is today. My question then was, how do you talk to that absence? You've got to write it into being.

In a nutshell, I am a decolonial fashion activist.

- Erica De Greef

An exhibition titled *Fashion Cities Africa*¹¹ opened at the Brighton Museum from 2016 to 2017, before moving to the Tropenmuseum in the Netherlands in 2019. This exhibition was the first that brought “fashion” and “Africa” together in such a way. Erica de Greef, a fashion curator and co-founder of the African Fashion Research Institute [AFRI],¹² was involved in this project as an art curator specialized in the materials. These collections showcased a way in which to tell intricate stories focused. De Greef states in an interview that “because fashion had largely been allocated to ideas of Western fashion, African dress was generally still consigned to ethnographic museums” (Gibbon, 2022). From these exhibitions a book (with the same name) was born,¹³ which explores the ways in which certain fashion histories have been silenced in the global narrative of fashion.

De Greef explains that the evolution towards centring African fashion stories and giving them the validity of being true fashion representatives, was fuelled by a series of shifts. First came an awareness towards decolonization, then –which she thinks of as equally impactful– came the power of social media and digital access, which brought with it very different voices into the same playing field:

In an Instagram feed you can have a story by Vivienne Westwood followed by a story by Cedric Mizerio, a designer from Rwanda. They live on the same page, they share the same digital space, and they occupy the same attention. The opportunities to reach

¹¹ <https://brightonmuseums.org.uk/discovery/history-stories/fashion-cities-africa/> At the Brighton Museum; <https://www.tropenmuseum.nl/en/whats-on/exhibitions/fashion-cities-africa> At the Tropen Museum.

¹² AFRI is an institution that hosts, promotes, makes visible and reclaims stories around contemporary African Fashion and the way in which contemporary fashion practices draw in and make visible alternative fashion archives.

¹³ Tied to the *Fashion Cities Africa* exhibition, the book gives much needed attention to four key African fashion scenes: Nairobi, Lagos, Casablanca, and Johannesburg – one from each region of the continent. (Hannah Azieb Pool, 2016, Intellect Ltd.)

audiences have been disrupted. It has shifted the power of African fashion creatives to engage in a global dialogue (Gibbon, 2022).

And later, after the awareness through social movements, and the digital revolution, came the weight in the matter: what is being shown in museums. De Greef thinks that the counteraction is being articulated through fashion by Africans, “in terms of reclaiming, occupying, rewriting, and taking back power, voice and visibility” (Gibbon, 2022). And more so, she defends that “it’s no longer just about us, but it’s by us. [...] there has been a shift in agency in terms of who’s telling the stories and where acknowledgments are overdue. The refusal of being appropriated and spoken for, has allowed new spaces for African creatives to be heard” (Gibbon, 2022).

A lot of the damage made to the perception of African fashion comes from the missing awareness on the origins of the most popular fashions across the continent. Like wax fabrics – one of West Africa’s most popular fabrics– which also have an often-ignored origin. Interestingly, the inspiration for the first creations were not African; they derive from a traditional Indonesian fabric: *batik*. According to the study *The Wax Print: Its Origin and Its Introduction on the Gold Coast* (Ankersmit, 2019), it was during the colonization of the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia) in the early nineteenth century that the Dutch and other European settlers became interested in batik fabrics. But ultimately, the Indonesian market found no interest in the Dutch-produced versions of their fabric and the garments found their way to the African continent, where they were vastly popularized. And one obvious way to sell and market them was to tell stories through them, depending on the design and the colours, and that is how every pattern ended up carrying a meaning and even regional importance.

Reasonably, there is a sector of the public that does not want to recognize these fabrics as part of African tradition because their arrival is intimately tied to colonialism. Cameroonian designer Imane Ayissi has previously stated that he refuses to include them in his collections. In an interview with *Wiriko*, an important Spanish-language resource on African arts and culture, Ayissi explained: “For me, it is a colonial fabric, recently introduced in African societies, which has almost erased the other traditional African fabrics that were linked to African cultures and rituals”¹⁴.

Contrastively Yinka Shonibare’s art has on many occasions contained this type of fabrics. Yinka Shonibare is a renowned British-Nigerian artist that engages in colonial and

¹⁴ To read the full interview check the following link: <https://www.wiriko.org/artes-visuales/telas-africanas/>

post-colonial critique and uses textiles and garments to signify his message. Through a wide range of media, his work explores issues of colonialism, race and class. Recently, Shonibare's artwork has conversed with the growing activism around the decontextualization of public spaces and the reorientation of historical education, and as previously mentioned, Shonibare uses garments and textiles to signify part of the messages he layers in his art pieces. This can be seen in the wide range of his artwork available online and in different exhibitions worldwide.

In the project *Decolonised Structures*¹⁵ (2022) Yonibare models a recreation of seven public statues of British imperialists that, usually covered in bronze and marbles, shape London's cityscape. The figures are stripped of their authority and instead clothed in the colonial legacy of Dutch wax patterns. By decontextualizing these monuments, Shonibare reveals the ties between places and powers through this fabric design and highlights the political realities that gave rise to the monuments. Because of the connection to colonialism, these fabrics also remain the focus of intense cultural debate. Thus, in this way, Shonibare demonstrates how the presence in public spaces of the statues evokes pressing discussions around Britain's relationship with its past and the institutional racism it conceived. Such fabrics bespoke colonial trade, originally made in Holland with an Indonesian technique, and exported to Africa. Today, they are symbolic of African dress. Many other of the garments in Shonibare's work are made from wax fabrics and highlight the importance these fabrics have in the fashion system, and in African diasporic communities: "In Brixton, African fabric is worn with pride amongst radical or cool youth [...] It becomes an aesthetics of defiance, an aesthetics of reassurance, a way of holding on to one's identity in a culture presumed foreign or different" (Shonibare, 2006).

Throughout the globe it still seems like there is this exotic gaze and perpetuation of stereotypes; and it is hard to say whether the trendiness or focus on African Fashion is a frivolity of the luxury industry, or if it represents a meaningful evolution. Nonetheless, African fashion is a reality and a comforting blanket for Africans all over the globe. According to the Mandela Institute for Development¹⁶ studies, the success of wax-fabrics lays in the re-design, by the shopkeepers and tradesmen, using African stories and narratives which resonated with the people. From fables to culture, Africans now proudly use these garments as a form of silent communication between regions, speaking through this narrative system on subjects that were

¹⁵ To see the collection of work and other pieces by Yinka Shonibare, consult his online archives: <https://yinkashonibare.com/exhibitions/sharjah-biennial-15-thinking-historically-in-the-present/>

¹⁶ As mentioned in the article by MINDS "Fabric Map of Africa: The Art of Storytelling". <https://minds-africa.org/fabric-map-of-africa-the-art-of-storytelling/>

even taboo. These prints represent emotions and mark celebrations, rites of passage and other messages, creating a visual language full of signs that spread across Africa and its diaspora. Fabric connects people to culture; the physical garment ultimately represents sensations of knowledge and love.

3.3 *The African Design Scene & Wanda Lephoto*

The African design scene, as well as the fashion landscape of its diasporic communities, produces some of the most ground-breaking creations in fashion. Historically, African-identifying creatives have struggled to make a name of their own in the fashion world, and they still struggle to maintain a parity with their western global peers. On top of these struggles lies the current task this paper is concerned with of decolonizing and centring African narratives and fashion. Fittingly, this is an intertwined set of tasks, since African fashion constitutes in itself a way to tell African stories and experiences, and share knowledge, history, and ideas through this same narrative system. Lately, a few designers from the continent have been discussed and awarded in the mainstream¹⁷ as clear examples of the decolonial intentions mentioned above. Many creatives regard these ideas –equality, recognition, power, history– as foundational for their different projects. The garments these designers create participate in a semiological language that carries many different meanings even in the tinniest of details. In South-Africa, collaborators like De Greef are interested and excited by the prospects of the industry, but also by “the threads of the past as ways to map out fashion futures” (Gibbon, 2022). To code and decode these meanings, the designer and the observer must understand the context and past of the cultural artifact in question. Designers like Faith Oluwajimi, Adebayo Oke-Lawal, and Wanda Lephoto, for example, are calling into their practice ideas of the past in very important ways.

Erica De Greef states in Gibbon’s *Rethinking African Fashion* (2022) that there is an interest in the ways in which those pasts are being illuminated and –as mentioned in previous pages– how digital platforms can share these stories. It could be said that a bright future is the origin of this illumination, as African creatives focus on storytelling to tailor their brand to the African fashion landscape. Such as is the case of Orange Culture¹⁸, from the mind of Adebayo Oke-Lawal. Described as more than just a fashion brand, it is established as a movement that

¹⁷ Faith Oluwajimi, the African designer behind Bloke recently became a finalist for the LVMH Prize 2023 – still it was the only brand representing Africa and its diaspora.

¹⁸ To know more about the brand and its collections, visit their website at: <https://orangeculture.com.ng/>

uncovers and highlights Nigerian culture, heritage, and activism through storytelling. Orange Culture's Spring/Summer 2022 collection titled *Peacock Riot* was born from the social unrest and protests caused by the #EndSARS movement¹⁹ in Nigeria. This collection explored themes of inclusivity, isolation, and dignity as a human right. *Peacock Riot* sought to address issues of prejudice and discrimination through design, narrating in this way important contemporary stories from Nigeria. In such manner, Oke-Lawal uses for this collection the tool of fashion to narrate and communicate ideas and demands. Another Nigerian based fashion brand, Bloke²⁰ by Faith Oluwajimi, is focused on showcasing contemporary genderless features and deconstructing the boundaries of fashion through storytelling. Built on the premise of self-expression, Bloke pays homage to and embraces African culture and heritage and recites tales that are personal yet communal. Again, Oluwajimi's work uses fashion as a tool for storytelling and to represent a series of ideas that follow their view on contemporary African society.

Thus, there are a few names changing the notions of contemporary fashion in Africa. But the creations of Wanda Lephoto and his collaborative work with researchers like Erica De Greef perfectly entail the ideas behind this paper. Wanda Lephoto is a South African contemporary designer and founder of the eponymous brand Wanda Lephoto, which uses storytelling to explore the various facets of South African style and culture. In doing so, Lephoto confronts the country's colonial and oppressive past by highlighting South Africa's historical and present identity. As the brand's webpage²¹ states, Wanda Lephoto is here to tell a story. Lephoto has worked with De Greef researching the complicated coloniality of fashion collections in museums and exploring the possibilities of creative practices as a way to open up space for these new collections. Additionally, the African Fashion Research Institute presented the work of Wanda Lephoto at the Turbine Art Fair²² in July 2022, as a means to extend the more critical dialogue around fashion that is so often absent in general fashion media.

With each garment and collection, as Wanda Lephoto explains on the *Nataal* article on his AW21 collection (Jennings, 2021), Lephoto educates on and celebrates African identities

¹⁹ The #EndSars social movement (2020) fueled a series of mass protests against police brutality in Nigeria. The slogan calls for the disbanding of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), a notorious unit of the Nigerian Police with a long record of abuse on Nigerian citizens.

²⁰ To know more about the brand and its collections, visit their website at: <https://www.bloke.ng/>

²¹ To know more about the brand and its collections, visit their website at: <https://wandalephoto.com/>

²² Per their website, TAF is a "uniquely South African Art fair that brings together exhibitors from around Southern Africa to present, sell and celebrate works. The fair has become the epicenter of emerging art in South Africa. It presents a space for the showcasing of established and new talent in an environment that is immersive, accessible, and inclusive."

and cultures. The designer has been exploring the cultural aspects of contemporary sartorial expressions in his native South Africa for a long time, and *Black Renaissance* is the latest collection in which Lephoto is peeling back the layers of his country's colonial history. In the 2021 collection, Wanda Lephoto is reclaiming a people's truth. As mentioned above, Lephoto calls their past into this new project by finding inspiration for the AW21 collection in the practice of "cultural fusion": the blending of two or more worlds to create a space for new propositions for identity and representation. According to the brand's Instagram, the collection is also inspired by the Senegalese historian and politician Cheikh Anta Dip's concept "African Renaissance", the idea that the African people shall overcome their current challenges to achieve cultural, economic, and scientific renewal. As an illustration the 'City of Gold' workwear jacket and pants are inspired by the workers and miners of South African goldmines during Apartheid. The label also found inspiration in *The Black Photo Album* (2013), by late photographer Santu Mofokeng, which was of greatest significance because it documented family portraits of Black Families in South Africa during the 1850's to 1920's and raised questions as to whether the images represented evidence of mental colonization or a service to challenge prevailing images of "the African" in the western world. Another of the looks in the collection, the 'King Edward VII' suit and seersucker shirt, is inspired by how South African primary and secondary school institutions have continued to carry on the imposed colonial tradition of the school uniform that came with the British Empire.

From the very beginning Lephoto's mission has been to reveal under-represented stories of Black South Africans, using style as a platform to speak about race, healing, and progress. The project also finds inspiration in the Herero Tribe in Namibia, as photographed by Jim Naughten, and how the residents wear Victorian era dresses and paramilitary costume as a direct result of Namibia's early 20th century German colonization. The collection is thus inspired by decolonizing fashion and South Africa's fashion history –most of which has colonial origins– and it was created on the bicentenary of Britain's landing in South Africa:

My vision is to communicate real things that happen in real time to real people that often go unnoticed. I want to create an archive of work for future generations to tap into that represents African people in a manner that they haven't been represented before, but also in a manner that begins to heal. In South Africa, there aren't any archives of Black creativity and Black people that come from my background to draw inspiration from. I lean into this gap through a visual language that is based on truth, but that is also aesthetically pleasing, educational, and academic. (Picarelli, 2021)

Alongside these ideas, in his latest Fall/Winter 2022 collection titled *Gaze*, Lephoto is inspired by and emphasizes the identity and dress codes of ordinary citizens in South Africa. *Gaze* documents the lives and historic pasts of the office cleaner, general labourer, clerks, and factory workers, and discusses how sometimes people do not question where their uniforms come from. Lephoto brings these conversations to light and makes a statement intended to highlight who owns the conversation now. The designer explains that the collection explored the juxtaposition that makes one aesthetic language, the uniform, work for two worlds: one that is very peaceful, the church, and the other one reflecting the British army. As an illustration, the suits and trench coats of the collection showcase expressive colours, fabrics and patterns while still representing a formality like with the ‘Prince of Wales Relaxed Fit Suit’. The brand also utilizes a motive of tiny pink flowers to represent this new blooming:

I have always maintained that in a time where the world looks at Africa for inspiration, it is always interesting to observe what, where and how Africans move. Often having to reappropriate our own culture against the commercial viability the West has over us, we seldom look past aestheticism to unwrap the true nature of who we are. (Lephoto, n.d.)

Wanda Lephoto is thus trying to have an imperative conversation in the fashion world: one about decolonizing fashion and its consumption. There is a shared history of how fashion is made and consumed that goes widely ignored, and the western colonization of Africa is a shared history. As questioned by *Gaze*’s subtitle “Who Is Gazing?” the intention is to look and discover this common self, informed by the idea of being ‘watched’. The collection is described in a post from the brand’s Instagram page as this idea of a ride which is no longer a means to an end, but rather an end itself. It generates a reflection on the status of artistic practice in South Africa, which most people around the world *gaze* at, “mostly with documentary ideas of the height of historic struggle” (Lephoto, 2022). The descriptions of the pieces in their website mentions how it discusses this new economy of clothing produced with the status of art in mind and promotes that with the variety and talent of current practitioners it could be argued that the *gaze* of South African fashion is the most compelling anywhere in the world today (Lephoto, 2022).

As per their website, Wanda Lephoto explores a notion of luxury dress merging African cultures, traditions, identities, and approaches with global nuances to form new propositions for representation. The project is, as a whole, a case study examining unspoken African stories.

As seen, Lephoto seeks to do away with the Western gaze, traditionally demeaning and belittling, and thrive within the burgeoning community of African creatives. As mentioned in the initial parts of this paper, African and African-diaspora's communities share a persistence to tell a story which, according to Amarachi Nwosu's article, Lephoto represents: "The ability to express ourselves through style and culture makes us unique as Africans" (Nwosu, 2018).

The Wanda Lephoto label also aims to find balance between traditional symbolism and modern subculture styles, like streetwear and workwear staples –a classic narrative used by Black designers when showcasing the dichotomy of their identities– and seen in many of their collections. African fashion and Lephoto's fashion are not limited to conversing with the past, but also with the present and realities of these worldwide communities and identities, and with the possibilities of a future through those very clear intentions. Through fusing stories and creating cultural hybrids, Lephoto wants to share the under-explored contexts of African art and design by educating viewers through style. Rather than approaching design from a singular lens, he uses his experiences and community as a canvas and selectively works with people who are challenging norms both in South Africa and around the world (Nwosu, 2018). Lephoto recognizes that as Africans, there is often a need to "re-appropriate our own culture against the commercial viability the West has over us" and he wants to "seldom look past aestheticism to unwrap the true nature of who we are. We try to tell our own story through our own voice" (Nwosu, 2018).

The meanings behind Lephoto's collections –both *Black Renaissance* and *Gaze*– are communicated through a thread of signs that relate to the people that construct the garment and use it. The intentionality of the design has succeeded, to converge an ideological and powerful message in a way that opens up the context of South African decoloniality to the user and observer. The brand is founded on critical research, focused on cultural fusion, collaborative work, spirituality, inclusivity, and the art of tailoring; this is noticeable in the narrative of its collections. Following the semiological analysis of these decolonial fashion materials, there is an appreciation of how the colonial status quo in the fashion system established a set of organized codes that fulfil the needs of certain parts of society (as seen in the workwear/uniform dichotomy of *Gaze*). These codes or systems into which signs are organized explain how various codes have evolved to fulfil the needs of a society or culture, in this case, of contemporary South African expression. Wanda Lephoto's work perfectly entails the study of the culture done by the brand, as observed in this paper, within which these systems operate.

Certain members of a society use certain signs, and decoloniality is motivated with the creation of new signs –often based in the old– for the members of a new society. Thus, since

the fashion system exists within a globalized culture, and South African culture is intertwined with not only colonialism but all the African and other post-colonial persuasions (as seen with the case of Indonesian Batik), these has an effect in the implied meaning of any garment being created today in South Africa. Notwithstanding that African creatives can reference and create from as wide of a set of signs as any other creative from the west and other areas of the fashion world. Wanda Lephoto is concerned with otherwise under-represented identities, people and groups, and entails the African spirit as the core inspiration for the telling of these contemporary stories. Tailoring not only forms the foundation from which most of the collections and garments are build; It describes the process of creative narration going into each piece. The past can be interpreted through the brand's craftsmanship, and the modern ways in which it creates bigger conversations. Ultimately, Wanda Lephoto's work aims to fuse a plethora of worlds and successfully creates a space that is free to explore ideas of decoloniality, while allowing people, from the creatives to the buyer, to negotiate the boundaries of their own representation and identity through style and culture.

4. CONCLUSION

Fashion, for me, is the most accessible medium. From an aesthetic, storytelling, and creative point of view, I am interested in fashion purely because it is the easiest format with which to tell my people's, and my own truth.

- Wanda Lephoto

After this research it can be confidently said that Fashion is a valid narrative system. It is intertwined with many areas of academic study, and it is a wonderful medium to explore and depict cultural ideas. Our society and culture are undeniably tied with fashion, and as seen in the case-study of the African design scene, the scope of its effect and potential for change is often ignored. Story-telling and self-expression are some of the powerful acts one can achieve through intentional dressing. Hopefully this paper has collaborated in the democratization of fashion and fashion knowledge, and to motivate its inclusion in fields related to the humanities and literatures.

The materials found while conducting this research were of many origins and formats, but the academic articles accessible on the topics around fashion appeared hard to relate to the perspectives proposed in this paper. Curiously enough, many articles interested in fashion as a narrative and an object of sociological research were from magazines and blogs accessible to the common reader – those concerned with style in general and often oriented to a feminine readership– and carried again the ever-present marginalization per the idea that the gendered as feminine cannot be intellectual, as posed in the introduction of the paper. This connection of fashion with the feminine, the marginalized, the Queer, the popular, the alternative, the “Other”, proves its penetration in all cracks of society and its margins.

The theoretical frames of semiotics, narratology and the decolonial approach were useful to understand on a deeper level the ideas behind some of the artistic projects and fashion collections explored. Semiotics and narratology aided the idea that fashion is a narrative system and permitted the observation of the narratives in the examples in a more detailed manner. While Roland Barthes was mentioned in an array of articles that discussed similar proposals to this thesis, as the focus turned more into decolonizing fashion by the exploitation of its narrative system, the author's ideas started to drift from this new-found perspective. Consequently, the decolonial approach was a wide source of knowledge and ideas to fashion into this paper, and reading about the work of Walter Mignolo in more general themes, and

Erica De Greef in relation to fashion, was very useful to later analyse the collections I was interested in.

The thesis that fashion is a valid narrative system, and a tool for decolonization, was limited in relation to the lack of time and resources that this project was sustained with. I would have liked to include a mention to other areas of study, like the later discovered field of Cultural Studies, or a more chronological investigation in how fashion has stood along societal movements across the centuries (from gender and feminism to workers' rights and labour reforms). And most importantly, the perspective of African fashion for this paper has been narrowed down to a few examples of mainly Nigerian and South-African designers. It is essential to state that a whole continent's fashion cannot be analysed through a few examples, but there is a general trend of decoloniality and innovation in many African capitals' artistic communities that resonates with what this paper proposes. Still if more time and space had been available, a look through some of the more than 50 countries that constitute Africa, or the diverse and almost-innumerable communities and ethnic identities of the continent, would have been an extremely enriching addition to the subject.

The context of fashion right now is being pressured by many different issues like sustainability or work-place abuse, but the matters of inclusion and decolonialization efforts are also a huge part of what fashion communities are striving for. Every day we see more and more creatives and other members of the industry (like models) representing once-marginalized identities and groups. Furthermore, I hope this paper also participates on divulging the work of the amazing designers mentioned throughout the text. I do believe that African-identifying creatives are doing great things for the fashion world and designing some of the most objectively impressive pieces.

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