AESTHETIC RENAISSANCE AGAINST WESTERN CONFORMITY: THE ROLE OF INDIGENOUS CULTURE.

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Introduction

Since its birth, fashion has been dominated by an aesthetic reflecting the way of life of the European, white, Christian upper class. Up until not more than a few decades ago, designers dictated trends, striving to redefine the idea of fashion every season. This idea was always rooted in Western aesthetic but it did, at least, try to convey different cultural aspects, leaving designers enough freedom to express their creativity.

Today, Western aesthetic still dominates the scene with its whiteness, its height, its thinness, and its post-colonialism, but designers no longer have freedom. Industrialisation, fast fashion and mass consumption have forced fashion design into a monothematic idea, theoretically responding to people's demands while in fact responding to ones of the market. The result? Everything looks the same.

The purpose of this paper is to analyse both this process of aesthetic homologation and how a change of guard in the fashion industry, led by a new generation of indigenous and independent designers, could shift towards more meaningful forms of self-expression as well as new business opportunities. To get the full picture, authors conducted both primary and secondary research. The latter was done mostly online as there is very little literature on the subject, while the primary research consists in a series of interviews with independent fashion designers focusing on freedom of expression, cultural identity, the value of craftsmanship, micro-, diversity and sustainability. Interviewees include Ashwin Thiyagarajan (India), Bernard Chandran (Malaysia), Rachel Cheong (from “Closet Children”, Singapore), Cameron Saul (from “Bottletop”, London), Shuting Qiu (Shaghai), and Dhruv Kapoor (India). We also analysed the practice of Luca Lin and Galib Gassanof (from Italian brand Act N.1) and Polina Osipova (Russia).

Aesthetic Homologation

The concept of ‘aesthetic independence’ defines the freedom of a designer to express individuality, detaching himself from the current taste and taking a course of action in a fashion industry characterised by globalisation and fast fashion. Such freedom is hard to achieve and even harder to maintain. In a fashion world dominated by Western conglomerates, the supply chain follows the rules of fast fashion even when the final products are marketed as luxury, while design follows the trends dictated by a global, Eurocentric, aesthetic which by now has also been watered down in terms of shapes, silhouettes, patterns and materials by the rise streetwear and athleisure, both deprived of their original sub-cultural value the moment they hit the runway. In this scenario, how can a brand innovate? How can it bring culture, creativity and novelty if, in order to survive, it has to keep up with market-induced demands of homologated consumers? How does a designer remain ‘aesthetically independent’? How can he or she express an individual aesthetic thought and at the same time hope for some commercial success?

In recent times, pushed by a shift in consumer behavior and the threat of climate change, the industry started promoting new ideals such as sustainability, diversity and inclusivity, ideally aiming at a more conscious form of production and consumption. However, due to the lack of both international regulations and an innovative fashion culture, these ideals ultimately turn into politically correct buzzwords such as ‘green’, ‘body positive’ and ‘gender fluid’ that ultimately serve no purpose besides further limiting creativity and freedom of expression. Overconsumption is antithetical to any kind of value, be it creative or commercial; brands are no longer defined by their products but by the way in which they communicate; as production costs are lowered, collections become homogeneous, design is less creative. High principles lose their value and become storytelling ideas and emotional narratives at the service of economic profit; enriching t-shirts and hoodies with a—questionable—social value is faster and then going through the process of rethinking it all. Any honest discourse around identity, diversity, nonbinary-ism, body-positivity, and so on disappears into a sea of homologation. How do you address diversity if you cannot even dress it?

The power of big conglomerates such as LVMH and Kering, with business models based on risk reduction and performance optimization, is totalizing; brand acquisitions lead to an even stronger market domination which, in turn, leads to an increasing uniformity in terms of style, design, fabrics and even logos and imagery—all oriented towards inorganic economic growth (Festa, Raimondi, and Fei, 2019). Their power as investors, also allows them to dictate and capitalise the style and the contents of fashion media, fashion editorials and influencers' user-generated content. Stylists and influencers are pushed into creating looks featuring only one label; how can fashion editors, stylists, and communicators express creativity, let alone culture, when they are reduced to mere dressers? (Ahmed, 2017).

As Cecilia Caruso recently wrote for NSS Magazine, considering how a reduced list of big brands monopolises the aesthetic of uniformity “it is undeniable that seeing always the same looks, unchanged and unchanging, from the catwalk to magazines to celebs and influencers for

the following six months, causes a flattening, a boredom, a homologation that is antithetical to the very nature of fashion" (Caruso, 2022).

Fast fashion also plays a big part in the aesthetic homologation as its wide spread has had an influence on luxury production. Hyperinflation and geopolitical tensions drive uncertain consumers to buy fast fashion (McKinsey, 2022), to a point in which fashion trends are no longer dictated (or expressed) just by luxury brands; the collections of certain fast fashion corporates, Inditex Group for example, have become so influential that they now lie in a grey area suspended between real-time fashion and premium luxury (Martino, 2021). To keep up, luxury and ready-to-wear brands feel compelled to produce capsules, drops and flash collections in a desperate race against time. These 'collections' are all produced by the same manufacturers which, often enough, are the same ones producing fast fashion, with very little change in terms of fabric, style and design. As a result, also fast fashion and luxury products have started looking the same, blurring yet another line.

Another relevant aspect is the one of Fashion Weeks, more specifically, their loss in business relevance. By now, there are countless fashion weeks and shows scattered all over the world, but none of them stand for successful commercial release. Consequently, designers aim at presenting their work during the more established ones, which still retain some of their glamour and the potential for visibility; but this will yet again have an impact on their creativity, as they will ultimately tend to adjust their collections according to the tastes of Milan, Paris, London and New York, often stripping them down of the non-conventional.

The impact of this globalisation of taste and style on independent brands is significant; independent designers are crushed by both the luxury players and by their affordable versions. From a strictly human perspective, the lack of personal expression and individual creativity is symptomatic of decay; from an environmental perspective, non-diversified overproduction is one of the biggest fashion-generated problems. How can creativity survive, let alone thrive, in this scenario, and how can we even talk about diversity, sustainability and community values?

Diversity of Voice

A possible answer comes from a new generation of independent designers who have been exposed to diverse aesthetic and cultural references since childhood. By translating their roots into the language of fashion and reclaiming their culture, these designers are slowly but surely paving the way to a more diversified aesthetic, one that explores diverse beauty ideals, different crafting techniques and different materials. Some are penetrating the global market, while others chose to focus on their native country, achieving international visibility through the media or by dressing celebrities. Both cases are influencing the global fashion discourse.

By researching international fashion and social media, and by going off the beaten path during fashion week (in particular Milan's September 2022 fashion week), we rounded up some of the designers that are channeling indigenous culture into a global Aesthetic Renaissance. Each one of their practices illustrate a different way of challenging the status quo.

Milan: outside the big show venues

Act N.1: bringing personal narrative to the catwalk.

The Milanese fashion week is notoriously the most conservative one in the fashion realm. Superb expressions of high-tailoring and exquisite exercises in ready-to-wear leave very little room for innovation, while a tight schedule packed with illustrious names makes it hard for new brands to find their space. This year, Act N.1, brainchild of designers Luca Lin (Italian-Chinese) and Galib Gassanof (originally from Azerbaijan) could count on the support of Valentino's Pierpaolo Piccioli, who streamed the show on all of Valentino's multimedia channels. Act N.1 was launched in 2016, winning *Who Is On Next* (Vogue Italy's scouting project) in 2018 and hosting its first runway show in 2019. The name stands for “the first the act of our lives”: Lin and Gassanof create a personal narrative through childhood memories of Chinese antiques (Lin), Azerbaijani artifacts and the threat of electricity cuts (Gassanof). Their way of referencing their cultural identity sets their work apart despite the substantial adherence to Western aesthetics; this has won the brand an extensive list of global retailers.

Shuting Qiu: bridging different scenarios.

Going off the beaten path during Milan Fashion Week means taking a closer look at the calendar, scrolling all the way down to the presentations, occasionally dodging the shows of the likes of Max Mara and Dsquared2 for the sake of Shuting Qiu's intimate presentation.

Shuting Qiu was born in Hangzhou, studied in Antwerp, presented her collections in New York and Milan, and now lives and works in Shanghai. Having graduated in 2019, she could not rely on a graduation show to gain momentum, and she was forced to go back China to endure lockdown:

> *Hangzhou is China's capital for silk and brocade and it has a centuries-old tradition of embroidery. Studying in Antwerp introduced to European fashion, but having to go back to China brought me back to my roots and led me to localize my production. There's a European fashion scene but there’s also a Chinese one which has a strong heritage and very distinguished features; my work bridges the two.*

Different cultural references call for different materials and different craftmanship. The use of high-quality local resources and crafting techniques allows to diversify the global production, a crucial matter for sustainability.

Dhruv Kapoor: combining local references with global aesthetic.

Like Shuting Qiu, Delhi-born Dhruv Kapoor studied fashion in Europe but launched his eponymous brand in his home country:

> *I work with what I saw growing up in India: color. The feelings evoked by colors give an emotional meaning to my collections. Having spent a lot of time in Italy, I know how to combine the vibes of my home country with a more subtle European*

> *fashion taste; this allows me to position myself internationally without having to compromise my ethos.*

As the head of a brand with quite few collections under its belt, Kapoor asks himself questions regarding sustainability:

> *Many companies here in India produce a surplus of fabrics, creating a new collection often starts by visiting them. But there are also social aspects related to sustainability, for instance, how can you work with your community? How can you empower by creating work opportunities? I work with local artisans, it is a mutual exchange of knowledge, they bring in the traditional know-how and we translate it in the language of contemporary fashion. We also try and educate through styling, creating products that can be worn in different ways by styling them up or styling them down.*

Versatility is something that belongs to traditional Indian fashion: the sari, for example, consists in a piece of fabric adjusted and accessorized in different ways according to the occasion or to one's phase in life.

Dhruv Kapoor was launched in 2013 and it is now gaining international recognition. After his menswear presentation in January, Kapoor returned to Milan in September to present womenswear, thus adding his name to the list of designers contributing to the so-called 'Aesthetic Renaissance' by referencing non-Western culture. As forecasters now, three is a trend.

Worldwide London

Bottletop: empowering indigenous communities while investing on the planet.

Bottletop was founded in 2002 by Roger Saul (founder of Mulberry) and his son Cameron, after Cameron returned from nine months living with an Indigenous community in South East Uganda with a bag made from recycled bottle tops and the desire to use sustainable design to support local artisans and raise funds for health education programs. The Bottletop bag became a bestseller, generating livelihoods on the ground in Africa and establishing the Bottletop blueprint for driving impact through design.

In 2005, during a trip to Salvador, Bahia, Cameron landed upon a group of women who had developed a crafting weaving together recycled aluminium ring pulls. Excited by this light weight recycled chain mail fabric and by its potential, they launched the Bottletop atelier and training program in Brazil in 2007. In 2016 they opened yet another atelier, this time in Kathmandu, where a local organisation uses traditional craftmanship to support supported women rescued from the streets. The brand's latest venture (dating 2022) consists in a collaboration with the Yawanawá Indigenous community form the Amazonian rainforest.

> *Our creative process depends on the cultural context in which we are working and on the availability of sustainably sourced material. Once we understand the*

> *capabilities of the artisans that we are working with and we understand what the availability is, then we are able to design within that context - it's a very delicate and sensitive balance. Our program with the Yawanawá is our first experience working with a remote indigenous community; they produce a lot of acai juice, and a large quantity of the fruit's seeds were left to biodegrate. We worked together with them to develop a processing these seeds, weaving them together to make jewelry and accessories.*

Bottletop has developed an extensive range of products, all of them combining Western and non-Western elements. In order to keep the production sustainable and fair, one production line cannot be replicated outside its original home country. Acai seeds belong to the Amazons, just like Nepalese crafting belongs to Nepal.

Today Bottletop can count on several partners in the fashion world, while many celebrities act as ambassadors.

Exploring the Far East

Bernard Chandran: creating a local fashion scene.

Bernard Chandran was born in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Growing up in an Islamic country and coming from a mixed parentage background of Indian and Chinese, he was exposed to a rich understanding of cultures at a very young age. He moved his first steps in the fashion world in a school in Kuala Lumpur, before moving to Paris.

> *Being away from my land and culture made me realize how important they were to me. I wanted to represent my heritage and communicate it to the rest of the world, so I went back to my country to learn more about its rich traditions and customs, and to find the way to reveal them by means of fashion.*

Malaysia is a very diversified country, there are different foods, different languages different religions and superstitions and even different religious festivities, There is Chinese New Year there is Diwali, and there is Eid. There is a strong connection with ancient history and ancient literature. Chandran incorporates all of this in his designs.

Regarding sustainability, he has mixed views.

> *When paired with a constant promotion of consumption, post-modern ideals of sustainability lose their essence and become mere marketing. I do not market myself as sustainable, but my brand ultimately reflects this concept. My waste-avoiding policy comes from a genuine appreciation of the work behind high-quality textiles: I saw in person the effort it takes to produce fabrics by hand and this has made me understand their value. The industry has an interest in homologation, that's why sustainability is difficult to achieve and aesthetic independence is difficult to maintain.*

Chandran does not have many retailers outside of his own country, but his celebrity clientele includes Lady Gaga, Estelle, Kanye West and Tori Amos, as well as the Sultan of Brunei. While there was hardly a fashion scene in Malaysia when he started, many designers have since followed his path. In 2007, he was conferred Dato (the Malaysian equivalent of a knighthood) by the Sultan of Pahang for his outstanding contributions to the development of Malaysian fashion.

Ashwin Thiyagarajan: breaking gender norms.

Ashwin Thiyagarajan was born in Chennai, India. He started designing gender fluid collections before it was fashionable, breaking gender norms and questioning stereotypes in a state where this is very much frowned upon.

> *Genderless simply resonates with my idea of fashion, and so does sustainability. Growing up in an Indian household I was exposed to the idea of using hand-me-downs, and I've always been raiding my sister's wardrobe since childhood. I recently designed a huge Lehenga collection (traditional wedding dress) and I had a lot of leftover brocade scraps. I used those scraps to create a capsule collection, I went crazy with the designs because I did not believe it would sell, instead it was a hit. I am slowly transitioning to fully genderless clothing: It is a very personal project, for me indigenous genderless clothing is a dream come true.*

In a society where genderless still remains an interdicting proposition, de-gendering fashion serves a big purpose. Unlike most Western gender-neutral pieces, the ones of Ashwin Thiyagarajan have form-fitting silhouettes that play with gender identity without sacrificing the body. One of his pieces made of leftovers was selected by *Never Have I Ever* star Myetreyi Ramakrishnan for the 2021 Unforgettable Gala.

Voices from the Instagram

Polina Osipova: reclaiming indigenous cultural identity.

Polina Osipova is a Russian artist in her twenties whose wearable art pieces reference her Chuvash roots. Chuvash is an indigenous ethnic group with roots to the west of Russia's Volga River. Like Russia's other many indigenous populations, which include the Tatar, the Nenets, and the Evenki people, they are often overlooked by the Slavic-Russian mainstream, ultimately generating mixed feelings regarding one's background. "I remember that it was very fashionable to just say that you were Russian" Osipova explained to Vogue. It wasn't until she moved away from her hometown that she started to research and appreciate Chuvash culture: "I was totally immersed in this culture and realized its magical power and peculiarity only when I moved from the Chuvash Republic."

After inheriting traditional Chuvash jewelry from her great-grandmother, Osipova's connection to her backstory grew even stronger. Now she uses her family heirloom and photographs sent to her by the Chuvash community to reinterpret traditional jewelry and attires, often modeling

her own creations. It makes for a compelling story about the complexity of Russian and Soviet history, and being indigenous under the weight of the dominant culture.

In recent years, Osipova's work has been snowballing across social media, landing her coverage on established publications, an exhibition at the East London's Hoxton Gallery, and a project with Gucci – proving that also the 'cool' Western fashion brands need original input. "I think the reason people respond to my work is because our world is so globalized," she said in an interview for Dazed "people are attracted to honesty, and I am very honest in what I share. I try to use my platform to teach people that Russia is not simply a Slavic country—there are more than 180 ethnicities with their own native lands, languages, and traditions. I want to show how different our lives can be, even in the same country."

Business Opportunities

Fashion is creativity, it is the expression of culture and cultures. It is the mirror of society: who we are, what we look for, who we would like to be. It is also an extremely profitable business; just in 2022, according to Euromonitor, it generated 1.72 trillion dollars sales globally speaking (Miele, 2022). It also employs millions of people all over the world. It is only reasonable at this point to question whether a more liberated aesthetic approach, combining non-Eurocentric values and references, alternative forms of craftsmanship, and less exploited materials, can positively affect the business. Can integration of models and heterogeneous cultures which differ from the mainstream ones be a level for success also in terms of business growth? Can a diversification of raw material, processing methods, production line and distribution modes be a way to position oneself distinctively in the market and reach target clients that are not satisfied by the actual proposals?

There are many variables involved in a successful positioning, we identified three particularly relevant ones:

1. the category (the specific industry segment in which one operates);
2. the referring geographical market;
3. the price range positioning.

Regarding the industry segments: proposing an aesthetic and a manufacturing model which are divergent from the dominant ones within a segment that is historically conservative, for example menswear, is very different then proposing them in a segment which is by connotation more open to the novelty and to contamination, like denim. However, nothing should be taken for granted: even the classic tailored suit can be significantly changed through elements originating from the contamination with different worlds, and such changes can have a value both from an aesthetic and a cultural point of view. Without distorting the entire garment, one can elaborate certain components, such as external details (material, buttons) and internal finishing (color, prints, lining). On the other hand, even the most subtle changes in terms of shape can transform the social value of the garment by giving it a different connotation and modifying the attitude and posture of the wearer. This less disruptive strategy allows to reach two goals: approaching new clients by targeting a category of consumers that is attracted by this stratification of culture and meaning, and preserving the traditional clientele by respecting the distinctive features of the product (or brand).

The geographic area is also a fundamental variable. Given their history or their current social situation, certain geographic markets are more prone to accept the ‘mongrel’—the integration of cultures and heterogeneous backgrounds—also within their traditional garments. Others are more closed, more withdrawn, and more hostile to openings. This has nothing to do with the people specifically, as it largely depends on the geopolitical situation of the area. Significant differences may also occur within the same geographic market. Let us take, as an example, two countries which are in many ways different regarding their openness towards foreign cultures: the United Kingdom and Italy. While fiercely holding on to its identity and its heritage, on a practical level, the UK is more inclined to integrate foreign cultures (and foreign products) in its lifestyle, while despite its history of immigration and its geographic position as a cultural crossroad, Italy is more closed. However, if we look at the lifestyle and consumption in big cities such as London and Milan (which are also, incidentally, fashion capitals), both show an inclination towards products and brands that are able to combine different worlds on different levels (vision, mission, production, aesthetic and so on). Cities are by definition a melting pot of people, cultures, and languages, and their inhabitants are more predisposed to integration. This has a clear reflection in terms of business: a brand whose image and products are based on cultural contamination is more likely to find its main target in large urban centres. This should be considered when defining a distribution strategy or when planning a communication campaign.

Finally, there is the subject of pricing. Aesthetic innovation brought on by cultural contamination, crafting, and by the use of unconventional materials, is made possible by a great deal of research and experimentation. These cost money, energy, and time. For this reason, a brand embracing aesthetic innovation (and sustainability) will usually position itself, in a landscape which is already highly competitive, with a price range higher than the average. However, what does higher mean? How much are consumers willing to pay for a certain product and how much are they willing to pay for another one with different characteristics? Very much depends on the peculiarity of the product (design, style, manufacturing, materials and so on) but a lot also depends on how the brand manages to convey the value of the work behind the product, namely its ability to communicate the value of the research and experimentation that lies behind a collection. Business opportunities should always be considered when launching a new brand or modifying a course of action, and approaching fashion with diversity in mind offers multiple profitable options.

Conclusion

Considering the current scenario, aesthetic innovation can no longer be seen as merely a stylistic choice dictated by one's taste or by a business model. It is becoming more and more a pressing matter for various reasons. First and foremost, in a globalised society, forcing everyone to speak only the stylistic language of the West is anachronistic to say the least, especially considering that the Western world, and Europe in particular, is arguably going through a down-phase with very little to give in most fields. Second, as we mentioned before, homologation is synonymous of a cultural and spiritual impoverishment and should therefore be contrasted. Third, having the same, mass-produced designs all over the world across, sold

at a relatively cheap price, produced by the same manufacturers using the same materials, has a disastrous impact on the planet, and this is something we can no longer afford to ignore. Last, although not in terms of importance, homologation precludes any relevant discourse in terms of diversity and inclusivity that will continue to remain nothing but buzz-words unless we educate ourselves to different aesthetics. In all of these aspects, the knowledge, understanding and appreciation of indigenous cultures play a pivotal role.

At this point, we place our hope in the change of the guard, hoping that the new generation of fashion designers will lead the industry to a new era, and that the historical names who have contributed in making fashion a powerful industry, will take pleasure in supporting them.

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