

## FROM POST-HUMAN TO PRO-HUMAN: WHY THE FUTURE OF FASHION IS HUMANIST

### AUTHORS

Wild, Benjamin  
Doctoral course / Ewha Womans University  
b.wild@mmu.ac.uk

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### ABSTRACT

Robert Pepperell does not mention fashion within his Post Human Manifesto (1995). Had he done so, he would have recognized that the blasé attitude, ideological flexibility, and ambivalence to the past that characterize the post-human condition were manifest within it during the twentieth century. As early as 1903, philosopher Georg Simmel had argued that an 'indifference toward the distinction between things' existed within western society ([1903] 1971). For Simmel, one example of this equivocation is manifest in dress, as people use their clothed appearance to pursue contradictory aims of conformity and uniqueness. Social traumas during the twenty-first century that include economic recession, political polarization, increased environmental instability, and the Covid-19 pandemic, which exacerbated all, have seen the fashion industry take a humanist turn. Recognizing the psychological salve that clothing provides and the need to leverage its global significance to support initiatives that champion social responsibility, the industry has turned flexibility into focus, indifference into diligence. This developmental paper argues, contrary to Pepperell, that fashion's future will be Pro-Human and humanist. By this, I mean that the future will be framed by the active, constructive involvement of humans. However, to fulfil pandemic-era proposals that called for a 're-wiring' of the fashion industry there is a need to be more aware of the dynamic role of history within people's lives. A post human society devalues the past (Lipovetsky [1987] 1994), but as part of fashion's humanist turn we can see the increased influence of history within clothing styles, campaigns, brand values, as people look for stability and seek to solve engrained social ills. In this paper I outline the importance of the past in shaping fashion's present and future. In the spirit of the Post Human Manifesto, I offer a manifesto that advocates for the greater recognition of global history within fashion.

### INTRODUCTION

Robert Pepperell does not include fashion or the Fashion industry within his Post Human Manifesto (1995). Had he done so, he would have recognized that the blasé attitude, ideological flexibility, and ambivalence to the past that characterize the post-human condition were manifest within it during the twentieth century. As early as 1903, philosopher Georg Simmel had argued that an 'indifference toward the distinction between things' existed within 'western' society ([1903] 1971: 329-330). He asserted that one example of this equivocation is manifest in dress, as people use their clothed appearance to pursue the contradictory aims of conformity and uniqueness. Philosopher Gilles Lipovetsky made a similar point, arguing that the Fashion industry 'gives impetus to modernism, and conservatism alike' ([1987] 1994: 150). Consequently, we should pause to reflect how well fashion fits within Pepperell's schema.

Social traumas that have come to define the twenty-first century, which include economic recession, political polar-

ization, increased environmental instability, and the Covid-19 pandemic which exacerbated all, emphasize still further the poor fit of fashion within Pepperell's thought because these crises have seen the industry take a humanist turn. Recognizing the psychological salve that clothing provides and the need to leverage its global significance to support initiatives that champion social responsibility, the Fashion industry is turning flexibility into focus, indifference into diligence. The importance of this shift is emphasized by its advocates, who are perhaps most readily associated with the industry's ills.

During the period of global Covid lockdowns in 2020 Alessandro Michele, then creative director of Gucci, took to Instagram to criticize the Fashion industry and the people it clothed. He lamented people's 'reckless actions' that had 'burned the house we live in' (Online). Fixated on '[s]o much outrageous greed', he asserted that humankind had lost 'the harmony and the care, the connection and the belonging' (Ibid.). In a similar vein Anna Wintour, global chief content officer for Condé Nast, global editorial director of Vogue, and editor-in-chief of American Vogue, has spoken of the need for clothing to reflect people's values. Even before the pandemic, in 2019, she claimed that '[o]ne big change I see right now [...] is a sense that customers, CEOs, owners of big businesses, are really searching for what fashion means today and how that there needs to be an emotional connection, and that fashion cannot be seen as something that is in anyway disposable ... [M]aybe a sense of value and connection is very meaningful right now' (Online). These are only two voices, but they demonstrate the humanist turn that the Fashion industry is beginning to take.

Consequently, I want to use this developmental paper to argue, contrary to Pepperell, that fashion's future will be humanist. However, to maintain this trajectory and fulfil the promises of pandemic-era proposals that called for a 're-wiring' of the Fashion industry, there remains a need for the industry, and fashion education, to become more aware of the dynamic role of history within people's lives, which informs their values and behaviours (Online). A post human society devalues the past (Lipovetsky [1987] 1994), but as part of fashion's humanist turn we can see the increased influence of history within clothing styles, campaigns, brand values, as people look for stability and seek to challenge engrained social ills. In this paper I will outline the importance of the past in shaping fashion's present and future and, in the spirit of the Post Human Manifesto, offer a provisional manifesto of my own that advocates for the greater recognition of global history in the Fashion industry and fashion education. To frame my thinking, I want to focus on two concepts. One is ostensibly the abnegation of history; the other could not effectively exist without it: modernity and narrative.

## **MODERNITY**

One of the main reasons why Pepperell's notion of the post-human compels is because of the concept of modernity that has come to dominate how we think we live as humans during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and how we study how we think live. But modernity is not a neutral concept. A preoccupation with modernity is a peculiarly 'western' phenomenon, and it is from within the 'west' that this anglophone term originated. Cultural scholar Elizabeth Wilson defines modernity as 'oppositionalism and iconoclasm, [it is a] questioning of reality and perception, [it is an] attempt to come to grips with the nature of human experience in a mechanized 'unnatural' world' ([1985] 2003), 63). According to philosopher Jürgen Habermas, people's discomfiture with their existence leads them to question socialized expectations of how they should act and behave (Miller 2004, 113–127). Far from being a liberating experience, anthropologist Daniel Miller argues that the 'pressure [on people] to create [their] own normativity . . . produces a tremendous desire for self-reassurance' (1994 58–81). Consequently, to cope with the unnerving effects of 'oppositionalism and iconoclasm' people – and I suppose I chiefly mean 'western' people, to whom the concept is most readily and frequently applied – are likely to construct their realities in response to what they experience immediately and regularly; that which seems certain (Wild 2024, 3-4). These circumstances are likely to crystallize the ambivalence and sense of equivalence that Pepperell wrote about in his Post Human Manifesto. This is because a preoccupation with modernity occludes a historical perspective, chiefly on account of its hybrid construction of time. If modernism emphasized chronological linearity, within post-(post)modernism chronology is altogether more fragmented. For this reason, modernity and its cognates can incline people to adopt a unidimensional view of culture because thinking beyond what is immediate and immanent becomes harder. The myriad choices and contradictions

that characterize a modern society curtail the scope of people's (critical) thinking, arguably making it more selfish.

Or so modernity and its exponents would have us believe. It seems reasonable to assert that mechanization, digitalization, and the constant global connectivity that has resulted, poses increased, and increasing, existential challenges for humans, but the opinions of Michele and Wintour, precisely because they seem so incongruous to how we might have previously perceived their role in the Fashion industry, hint at the humanist turn that is becoming manifest in fashion. They demonstrate that the consequences of modernity as concept and perceived experience might be vicious, but they are not circular. More than this, Michele and Wintour challenge the assumption, evident in the writing of Pepperell and Lipovetsky, that people of the Anthropocene are either accepting of or ambivalent about the apparent liquidity of their times, to invoke the ideas of sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, who has critiqued our 'liquid modernity' (2007). Their assertive statements, however reactionary we may take them to be, suggest that a desire for human connectivity and shared stories through which people acknowledge, critique and champion communal values and desires, exists in the Anthropocene. Reflecting on the Covid pandemic, I might go further and suggest there is a positive correlation between increasing social trauma and people's interest in narratives that enable them to substantiate their connection with others. In short, as human existence appears more chaotic, contradictory, and blurred in the Anthropocene, broad, expansive, and thus captivating, stories are like ropes slung over the side of a lifeboat to wrench us from turbulent seas.

## **NARRATIVE**

This brings me to the importance of narrative. Pepperell does not dwell on the role of narratives or stories in human culture. In his Manifesto he tells us that the post-human human 'avoids excessive scholarship' (1995: 180). They reject the search for ultimate origins, acknowledging that some things can never be known, and are content to have a limited capacity to 'understand and control nature' (184-185). Nonetheless, Pepperell is aware of the human need to be stimulated and he recognises that this often comes from the dynamic tension produced by stability and instability (106-107). Here, narrative plays an important role. Ironically, and inevitably, as narratology has burgeoned within the humanities, a definition of narrative has become trickier, but I for my purposes here, I understand narrative as a strategy to communicate complex ideas and experiences that help to establish and assert identity.

As global certainties have become less sure, the role of narrative – of tracing, even asserting, our past, present and place within both – has become more urgent (Ryan 2007: 22). It was interesting to me that when Queen Rania of Jordan was first interviewed by Christiane Amanpour for CNN following the attack on Israel by Hamas on 7 October 2023, she used the word 'narrative' three times and 'story' seven times. She spoke of 'myth' once and 'memories' twice. All within an interview that lasted just under five and a half minutes. In an age of 'fake news' and 'alternative facts', recourse to narrative seems important because of the emphasis this form of communication gives to longer, nuanced chronologies. Narratives are the antithesis of the soundbite and, something that has become more common since the presidency of Donald Trump, the Tweet, which restricts everyone's observation, indignation, and provocation to 140 characters.

The narrative turn in fashion is evident within the academy, as we devote more time to reflect on the place of social justice within the industry, be this through discussions of the circular economy or the decolonisation of our curricula. It is evident within the industry as brands pursue social justice initiatives, or, more playfully, but no less purposefully, construct artful catwalk shows and campaigns that elide their values with that of their consumers. Think of the story-telling set-pieces by Thom Browne, or closer to home for me, Chanel's decision to hold their métiers d'art show in Manchester's Northern Quarter in December of last year, an area of the city associated with the industry's nineteenth-century origins.

## **CONCLUSION**

If we recognise that modernity is an ill-fitting construction to explain the complexities of our present, and the role

of narrative that helps us to situate ourselves, to scrutinize and to sustain the connections people share with one another, so we also come to acknowledge the dynamic role of the past. To invite further reflection and discussion, I offer my Humanistic Manifesto for Fashion's Future in the spirit of Pepperell's endeavour. Robert Pepperell's Post Human Manifesto consisted of eight sections, each with a numbered series of statements (1995: 180-196). My own is written in a style and tone that resembles Pepperell's text of 1995, so it is assertive, provocative, perhaps even polemical. Crucially, my sentiments are divergent because, for me, fashion's future is humanist.

## **A HUMANISTIC MANIFESTO FOR FASHION'S FUTURE**

1. The Anthropocene emphasizes the impact of humans on our planet. This impact is conventionally understood to be negative. Irrespective of whether humans are wholly culpable for the challenges confronting the world, their involvement in identifying and implementing strategies to ameliorate them is clear. Consequently, the Anthropocene centres humanity's responsibilities towards the planet. This is especially the case with fashion, which impacts most of the world's population as its fourth biggest industry. The Anthropocene is not post-human.

2. Modernity is a 'western' construct. It prioritises a 'western' perspective and accepts as axiomatic that culture is unidimensional, that history is subordinate, that people exist in various states of unbelonging and disenfranchisement. Consequently, it confounds more than it clarifies understandings of the complexities of human existence in the Anthropocene and should be rejected as a descriptor and analytic construct.

3. Narratives – stories – allow people to trace their origins and map their futures through a discussive, nuanced reflection of their present. Stories establish connections between people. They are a form of cultural glue, the adhesiveness of which becomes stronger during times of social stress. Within the Anthropocene narrative has become more urgent. Narrative and storytelling revel in the human.

4. History is a dynamic element within people's lives. It shapes their behaviours and thoughts. Recourse to past seems to intensify during times of social turbulence. Consequently, within the Anthropocene, a period increasingly characterised by seismic global challenges (many of which become manifest through fashion), the imperative to understand the role of the past is clear and urgent.

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