

## THE CYBORG AESTHETIC OF ALESSANDRO MICHELE

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### ABSTRACT

Taking place in a medical operating room and directed by its former creative director Alessandro Michele, the Gucci Fall 2018 fashion show featured numerous pieces of clothing without any apparent coherence. Among the Italian fashion house's historical references (Web stripes, monogram or Flora print), other elements drew on a wide range of sources of inspiration, from fashion history (Chanel tweed) to religious clothing (Catholic stole or Sikh turban), via collaboration with Major League Baseball or other movie motifs (Pussy Cat Kill Kill, Paramount logo).

Thus, the show could be understood by some through the prism of the multiculturalism characteristic of the 1980s (Bourriaud, 2009), of which Jean-Paul Gaultier was one of the incarnations. However, the theoretical reference used by Alessandro Michele, the *Cyborg Manifesto* (Haraway, 1987), published in 1985 by the American feminist Donna Haraway, offers us the possibility of another reading. The philosopher, often associated with the post-humanist movement (Schwerzmann, 2018), calls for the creation of a post-genre world built around the figure of the cyborg, against the myth of origin, and all binarity, whether human-animal, organic-machine, physical or immaterial (Haraway, 1987). Reading this text gives us a more precise grasp of the meaning of the show. Michele's challenge is to imagine a post-human creature, on the model of the Cyborg, through the use of various heterogeneous inspirations.

Drawing on a corpus of different Gucci fashion shows from Fall 2015 to Resort 2023, the article aims to reread Michele's work through the posthuman aesthetic defined by Anneke Smelik in 2022. It will argue that Alessandro Michele's work for Gucci must be understood according to his attempt to formulate a post-human aesthetic, tending to reveal the constructed nature of clothing identities.

### INTRODUCTION

On Wednesday November 23, 2022, Kering announced the departure of Alessandro Michele from the creative direction of Gucci, a house he had joined in 2002, where he held various positions such as director of leather goods, assistant to Frida Giannini, the previous artistic director, and finally artistic director in 2015. At this point, it was time for the fashion critics to evaluate these eight years of work, both commercially and aesthetically. On the latter aspect, various qualifiers were used: in *Le Monde*, for example, Maud Gabrielson evoked Gucci's "baroque romanticism" and "bohemian '70s references", as well as its "clashes of floral and psychedelic prints" and its "mix of genres" (Gabrielson, 2022); Chloé Mac Donnell, for *The Guardian*, praised the brand's ability to assimilate the Gucci heritage with a more "modern" aesthetic, particularly in terms of gender (Mac Donnell, 2022); for their part, *New York Times* journalists Elizabeth Paton and Vanessa Friedman commented on the "magical" nature of Michele's aesthetic, based on

a mix of temporalities and references in a “more democratic social media age” (Paton and Friedman, 2022). In short, they agreed on two main characteristics of his work: the eclecticism of his temporal and cultural references, and his relationship to gender, with no mention of the notion of “posthumanism”.

However, although the Michelian aesthetic is indeed defined by the two properties just mentioned, it is the “post-human” aesthetic that permits to link them. Recent decades have seen the emergence of the notion of the “posthuman”; first in the field of ideas, then percolating in the aesthetic formulations of fashion designers. In her article “A Posthuman Turn in Fashion” (2022), cultural historian Anneke Smelik identifies the main stages in the dissemination of posthuman thought, from Ihab Hassan’s first understanding of the distinction between humans and non-humans in the context of technical and environmental change, to Katherine Hayles’s more measured text on technology, *How We Became Posthuman*, including also Donna Haraway’s *Cyborg Manifesto* (1985). In addition to the sphere of ideas, Smelik notes that this philosophy, that authors agree to base on the desire to create a “hybrid figure”, has had a major influence on many creative proposals for contemporary fashion from designers as diverse as Rei Kawakubo, Alexander McQueen, Gareth Pugh and Alessandro Michele. United around the desire to “blur the borders between human and machine, humans and animals, and organic and artificial”, these attempts share three main characteristics: an aesthetic defined by hybridization and the free arrangement of references, which she quite rightly situates in the wake of postmodernism in art (Bourriaud, 2009); a critique of “binary oppositions”, particularly of gender; and an ethical project aimed at decentering the human, and more particularly in relation to the environment (Smelik, 2022).

These three characteristics may help us define more precisely the work produced by Alessandro Michele at Gucci. This is the position we intend to defend in this article, positioning ourselves within the field of art contemporary history, and more specifically fashion history. Some might argue that dealing with such a recent period is not the work of a historian. However, we could defend the opposite idea, i.e. that it is in fact precisely the role of the art historian to take on this type of subject in a context of accelerating aesthetic proposals and the disappearance of certain archives (considering for instance fashion brands’ policies for their social networks<sup>1</sup>), especially as the Alessandro-Michele-Gucci period is now over. For the period between Fall 2015 and Resort 2023, we will use two main sources: runway shows, based on photographs and videos ; and show notes when we have access to them which will enable us to confirm our analyses historically. We will approach this corpus, or at least its sartorial expressions, using a semantic method inherited from Nelson Goodman, and more specifically from his *Languages of Art*, first published in 1968. Specifically, we will apply his notions of denotation and exemplification/expression to the fashion show, denotation commonly designating the type of individual or characters conventionally wearing this type of garment, and exemplification/expression, the “message” of the show, in other words the common characteristic that can be drawn from all the looks studied<sup>2</sup>. In this way, we will attempt to defend the following thesis: Michele’s work at Gucci must be analyzed through the prism of posthuman philosophy, as he offers one of its most accomplished models in fashion. In other words, this is the angle from which we must approach his monograph. Indeed, we find in his work the three characteristics of post-human thought identified by Smelik, in chronological order: an aesthetic based on hybridization, reflected in Michele’s critique of the idea of origin and the unbridled arrangement of heterogeneous references; a critique of different types of binarities, perceptible in the designer’s desire to create a new individual based on the model of the Cyborg defined by Haraway; and the ethical project, present in the eschatology/cosmogony scheme.

<sup>1</sup> We’re referring in particular to the social networks of brands and designers, where the Instagram stories disappear within 24 hours and where the accounts are sometimes emptied of any reference to the previous art director. By becoming aware of this, the historian can help to safeguard these future archives.

<sup>2</sup> We’re mentioning the method we developed jointly with Benjamin Simmenauer and Sarah Banon over the last few years in the research department of the Institut Français de la Mode. Based on an interpretation of Goodman’s writings on art, it aims to grasp the meaning of a fashion show through three levels of analysis, formal, semantic and aesthetic. This will be the object of a forthcoming publication.

## I. "TOMORROW IS NOW/YESTERDAY"<sup>3</sup>: A CRITIQUE OF THE MYTH OF ORIGIN

Officially appointed as head of Gucci's creative direction on January 21, 2015, Alessandro Michele started by a critique of the idea of origin, which he produces through his reflection on the Garden of Eden, which he then extends to an aesthetic based on a free arrangement of historical and cultural references.

The critique of origins is first perceptible in the designer's treatment of vegetal and animal references in his early collections. In Gucci's history, floral motifs traditionally refer to the Flora print first introduced by Rodolfo Gucci in 1966 (Forden, 2002). But Michele doesn't just replicate it literally. On the contrary, he relies on it to build what the brand would later call the "Gucci Garden"<sup>4</sup>, an environment that refers to the Garden of Eden<sup>5</sup>, a myth of importance to posthuman thought since it is recognized by Haraway as one of the most important episodes in the establishment of gender binarity (Haraway, 1987).

The numerous vegetal references in the Fall 2015 and Spring Menswear 2016 collections, far from paying homage to the gendered binarity characteristic of the Garden of Eden, paradoxically contribute to its questioning by focusing on the redefinition of femininity and masculinity. Michele's first women's collection for Gucci, Fall 2015, for example, is built around numerous vegetal elements that play a key role in revealing, even sexualizing, the female body (looks 1-3-7-33)<sup>6</sup>. In the men's silhouettes, these vegetal elements serve to deconstruct the masculine formal suit, adorned with floral motifs culturally associated with the feminine gender and exaggeratedly shortened at the sleeves. In Spring 2016 Menswear, the vegetal references become clearer and are once again used to "feminize" the men's wardrobe. While the process of applying floral motifs to formal suits is still present (look 19), Michele extends it to the entire collection, whether through plays on transparency (looks 6-9-20), or by associating it with elements culturally recognized as more "virile" (such as the leather jacket in look 16) or the historic monogram (look 31).

For their part, initially sparse, animal references are gradually increasing without aligning with a literal representation of the Garden of Eden. Spring 2016 saw the coexistence of a plurality of animals, such as ladybugs, birds and panthers. However, some of these are threatening, such as the black snake attacking the female genitalia (look 12), an idea reiterated in Fall 2016 by the presence of a black snake with a forked tongue masking the model's chest (look 23), or a parrot crunching on the snake (look 41), or a ferocious panther (looks 14 and 70).

Vegetal and animal references are thus part of a rather corrupt vision of the founding myth, closely linked to the question of gender. This reflection is successively accompanied by a free management of clothing references, that Michele clears of their origin; either historical or cultural. Referring to Marco Polo's travel journal in China, the Spring 2017 collection perfectly exemplifies this phenomenon with its undifferentiated management of a multiplicity of references, sometimes within the same silhouette. References to a fantasized China (looks 6-55) coexist with references to Japan (look 8), historic aristocratic tailoring (looks 3-13-25) with American student wardrobe (looks 35-41-67), to which we can add references to Donald Duck (looks 19-44) and rock clothing (looks 18-53). The Fall 2017 collection has a similar semantic approach. Set in a scenography built around a glass corridor surrounding a pyramid, it similarly presents an impressive diversity of references, ranging from traditional Chinese wardrobe (looks 4-9-24), to nerd culture (looks 12-14-51), rock music (looks 29-76-98), military references (looks 68-86-91), Chanel history (looks 1-90) and the work of the Spanish artist Coco Capitán (looks 69-85-113). In this way, we are assisting in the creation of a temporal and cultural space that does not concede any "authentic" history or origin to clothing references.

<sup>4</sup>The name is notably attributed to Gucci's exhibition space in Florence inaugurated on January 10, 2018.

<sup>5</sup>Let's briefly remind the common understanding of the Garden of Eden. According to biblical tradition, in the book of Genesis, the Garden of Eden refers to a place inhabited by Adam and Eve where, thanks to God, they are able to eat all the fruit available to them, except that of the tree of knowledge. Satan, in the form of a serpent, nevertheless convinces Eve to eat a forbidden fruit. This led to their forced departure from the garden, but also, and above all, to the realization that they were naked, and thus indirectly to the need to wear a garment to fulfill a function of modesty.

<sup>6</sup>The numbering adopted here follows the referencing system of the website Vogue Runway (<https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows>) and will be consistently used in this text. All the looks are available on the website.

## II. "CYBORG"<sup>7</sup>: THE END OF BINARY OPPOSITIONS

Gradually, this process, based on a semantic strategy defined by a free arrangement of temporal and cultural references against the idea of the origins, intensifies to take on the object of the individual construction process itself. This corresponds to two fundamental moments: the end of separate and gendered fashion shows – there will be only one for Fall 2020 – and the gradual slowing down, though not total disappearance, of sartorial references to the garden. Thus, the period between Spring 2018 and Spring 2020 is characterized in the discourse by a multiplicity of theoretical references in favor of the free creation of subjectivities such as Gilles Deleuze, Donna Haraway or Michel Foucault, whose sartorial translations call into question three types of binarities, the boundary between masculine and feminine, human and non-human, and normal and abnormal sexualities.

Although, as we've seen, Michele's reflection on gender appears earlier, it is also the subject of his Spring 2018 collection, which takes as its theme the act of creation as an "exercise in resistance". Michele's main aim is to find a sartorial application of the Deleuzian critique of fixity, according to which subjectivity is created through semiotic mobility<sup>8</sup> (Michele, 2017). This translates into various denotations of outfits historically worn by Elton John, whose archives Michele visited to create the collection. Purple jacket featuring musical notes (look 7), pink 1970s jacket with rhinestones (look 88), blue and red checked jackets (look 34) and the omnipresence of stars (look 18) all serve to exemplify a fluid vision of masculinity, largely initiated by glam rock in the first half of the 1970s (Auslander, 2006), here challenging the distinction between masculine and feminine.

The Fall 2018 and Spring 2020 collections both take the theme of identity a step further, taking place in a scenography denoting hospital settings. Entitled "Cyborg", the Fall 2018 collection presents itself as the sartorial embodiment of the Cyborg Manifesto written by Haraway and published in 1985. The collection thus revolves around different denotations of individuals whose outfits are constituted of heterogeneous references, sometimes contradictory, emptied of their "content", against the notion of origin. Gucci history (Flora print, Web strips, Monogram), fashion history (Chanel tweed), Catholicism (stole), non-Western references (Sikh turban, Indian head jewelry, Chinese pagoda), popular culture (Paramount, New York Yankees, Sega) or mysticism cohabit indifferently within the same space, enabling Michele to create a new, indistinguishable creature that has transcended gender or any form of binarity. However, Michele's work also includes the idea of medical manipulation, perceptible in the set design denoting an operating room (the models were walking in a decoy of a hospital waiting room, characterized by its specific seats and lighting, around two operating tables). The references to cloning (looks 1-71) and the presence of inert animals and chimeras such as chameleons, snakes and dragons (looks 22-42-57) suggest the medical hypothesis of the creation of identity, an idea reinforced by the Gucci garment cover worn in the last look, suggesting the creation of a non-human after surgery.

The Spring 2020 collection also contributes to questioning binarities by focusing on the way fashion becomes a vehicle of power, in line with the Foucauldian notion of "biopolitics" (Michele, 2019). The set design creates an opposition between the idea of "normality", reflected in the various denotations of patients dressed in white monochromes that often resemble straitjackets, and the idea of "counter-normality", consisting in the actual collection proposed by Michele. The latter idea refers not only to transparencies, worn on the upper and lower body (looks 1-3-7-34-39), but also and above all to numerous BDSM references, culturally assimilated to "non-normative sexuality" (gloves, necklaces, whips), associated with formulas such as "Gucci Orgasmique". It is therefore through the expression of a liberated, non-normative sexuality that the hold of power over bodies is challenged.

<sup>7</sup>Inspired by Donna Haraway's Cyborg Manifesto, the Fall 2018 collection is entitled "Cyborg".

<sup>8</sup>We refer here more specifically to the notion of rhizome developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980).

### III. "GUCCI IN PINK ESCHATOLOGY"<sup>9</sup> : THE CONTRITION/REDEMPTION SCHEME

The project of building an individual that transcends binary oppositions gives way to a period marked by an eschatological dimension, which usually defines a discourse on the end of humanity. During the period between Fall 2020 and Spring 2023, Michele questions the ethical dimension of the posthuman, in other words, the future of man in a world subject to various health and climate catastrophes.

The Fall 2020 and Resort 2021 collections open a new period for Michele, focusing on the demystification of the dream. These two collections focus on the construction process of fashion, whether for the fashion show or an advertising campaign. In doing so, the creative director revived one of the mechanisms of conceptual fashion in the 1990s, when designers such as Martin Margiela and Victor & Rolf focused and reflected on the process of constructing a garment, but also a show (Evans, 2003). Presented before the Covid-19 crisis, on February 19, 2020, the Fall 2020 collection revolves around various denotations of archetypes culturally associated with innocence, such as the Catholic schoolgirl (presence of Christian cross on the runway), the little girl (Claudine collar) or the hippie of the second half of the 1960s (floral dress). These archetypes are deliberately demystified by the introduction of various elements referring to perversion (BDSM elements, make-up running down the cheeks of the models or weird facial expressions). The set design, where Gucci's dressers working to the sound of Maurice Ravel's "Bolero" are exposed to the public, also expresses this idea of demystification by revealing the process of a fashion show construction. The Covid period enabled Michele to extend his reflection on the fashion industry, whose "tyranny of speed" he then publicly denounced, and inserted within a contrition/redemption scheme<sup>10</sup> (Michele, 2020). His Resort 2021 collection "Epilogue", the first post-Covid collection in the form of a 12-hour live stream video, stands in line with the former collection as it aims to show the construction process of an advertising campaign. In this video, members of the Gucci design team are denoted wearing the pieces they have created for the collection. Although it takes place in the Palazzo Sacchetti, described by the brand as "one of the most beautiful buildings in Rome", this prestigious and lavish background is ironically not visible in the finalized version of the lookbook.

This reflection on man's "last ends" continues with Michele's attempt to conceive a new – Gucci – society. The mini-series "Opening of Something That Never Ended", directed by Gus Van Sant, follows Silvia's journey (interpreted by Silvia Calderoni) through seven episodes depicting everyday life scenes; from getting up ("At home") to the post office ("At the post office"), through conflict with the neighbors ("The neighbors"). The first episode shows Paul Preciado explaining the main characteristics of queer thinking. Michele then introduces various reflections on the world to come through different mentions of a disaster situation, through sometimes incoherent and inconsistent dialogues. In episode 2, for example, Silvia talking to her friend, wonders:

"- Why do people keep picking daisies ? Don't they realize they're killing our planet ?

-Yes, it's like a dog playing with a cat, and then a deer shows up, and then, I don't know all sorts of there creatures turn up. And they simply don't understand.

-They don't realize we're all connected? It is a very delicate geometry."

<sup>9</sup>The formula here refers to the T-shirt worn by Harry Styles in episode 4 of the mini-series "Opening of Something That Never Ended".

<sup>10</sup>The idea is that human beings have gone "too far" and that Covid-19 acts as a punishment, a retaliation from nature.

Episode 4 follows a conversation between an elderly man, in line at the post office, and Harry Styles, walking in his garden. The former remarks: "We live in rather tense times. Full of conflicts and confrontations. But also differences that manage to co-exist. Of joyful differences". Harry Styles responds by dwelling on the role of the artist in these troubled times. The idea of "Renaissance" then comes up:

"Fashion dresses humanity. Art lays it bare. And music is a massage to the atrophied muscles of collective awareness. We could say that this is the age of intermingling. An age marked by a certain lack of faith in our future. But

one where awareness of the present is vivid. And this is important, when you consider that there have been other times in which the same thing happened. Distant times, after the Renaissance.”

This call for the advent of a new Renaissance-like period, in which the artist would play an experimentation role, is accompanied by a representation of this new world. The video presentation of Gucci Aria focuses in the third part on the representation of a reformed Garden of Eden in which the end of binarities is definitively achieved. The question of gender and race is no longer an issue; love can also involve animals; its inhabitants merge perfectly with nature. But the collection, celebrating Gucci's centenary, is also an opportunity to defend a certain idea of aesthetics in this new world. Michele's collaboration with Balenciaga, a rival brand, once again denies the garment sign any historical content, raising questions about the real weight of Gucci's heritage. His penultimate show, *Cosmogonie* (Resort 2023), follows a similar pattern, promoting a way of thinking built on a collection of quotations. Ruffle collars from the late 16th century (look 15-61-88), "strawberry" inspired accessories (looks 48-80-98), lace-up thigh high boots (looks 4-14-59), archetypal shirt collars from the 1970s (looks 3-84-94) stand indifferently alongside studded and embroidered denim jackets (look 45-97), Barbour-style hunting jackets (look 58), floppy hats (look 60-65) and various garments featuring patterns ranging from Harlequin lozenges (look 43-87) to shapes more reminiscent of psychedelic inspiration (looks 48-53-90). Although the process, as we have seen, is recurrent, Michele is more precisely interested in that case in the legacy left by Walter Benjamin, which he defines above all building an assemblage of quotations, in the light of the catastrophe of the Second World War (Michele, 2022). It is on this "constellation" of thought, and consequently references, that it is necessary to elaborate the new world and learn the lessons of history.

## **CONCLUSION : ALESSANDRO MICHELE AND TRANSHUMANISM?**

Alessandro Michele's work for Gucci, with its reflection on the idea of origin, its critique of different types of binarities and its formulation of the new world, represents one of the most accomplished models of posthuman fashion today. In conclusion, we can venture a clarification of his relationship with technology. In her article "Why we are (no longer) posthumans", the philosopher Katia Schwerzmann (2018) shows perfectly that posthuman thought does not refer to a single current of thought. Indeed, she notes the existence of two major movements within posthuman philosophy: a fringe she defines as "bioconservative", opposed to a second she defines as more "transhuman". Both differ in their definition of the human being. While the former wishes to preserve the human being's "nature", the latter prefers the possibility of their technological augmentation. Which version does Michele seem to subscribe to? Although his Fall 2018 collection succeeds in shaping a new creature through the impressive arrangement of a diversity of references, it is interesting to take into consideration that this creation is accompanied by liturgical music, *Stabat Mater* by Giovanni Battista Pergolesi (1736), to which are added the sounds of a cardioscope, medical instrument commonly used to provide a representation of the heartbeat. In the wake of this observation, it is also interesting to note here that Michele eloquently compared himself as a creative director to "Frankenstein". Thus, far from subscribing to a naive vision of identity-based medical manipulation, Michele seems, on the contrary, to alert us of the dangers of medical intervention in the creation of this new posthuman individual, presenting in other words an ambiguous vision of the posthuman, at least in its transhuman sense.

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