

Bootleg Culture

by Silvia Bombardini



Gucci, FW16

As fashion begins to stumble on the sped up hamster wheel of its own turnovers, the infamous knockoff, which in its high-street pursuance might well be responsible for such hurried rhythms, is finding unexpected redemption among the urban youth – as the unlikely ally to undermine, at last, this quintessentially capitalist industry. That in its misdeed, the counterfeit object could rise to represent a form of social justice shouldn't come as a surprise: at its most simple and most ambitious, it welcomes the masses to what should have been a privilege of the few. A secret that would once have been shameful, however, now is cherished – when worn with self-awareness, it reads as an inside joke to those in the know. It may be blunt and innocuous, as funny as a pair of fake Calvin Klein underpants printed with fake Burberry tartan – it's one of the images featured in *Berberry* by Ditto Press, a photographic study, and homage, to the most copied of all patterns. The Calvin Klein elastic band, by itself, can be purchased for £15 on ebae.cheap, a cheeky corner e-shop that tags it as #basicore. But at a time when our more plausible knockoffs may well be made by the same skilled workers in developing countries who also make the originals, bootleg culture also questions consumerism and our desires, its lowly humour comes laced with disapproving undertones. Young parody brands like Davil Tran's

Vetememes mock a system whose values lie so disproportionately in context, it's driven itself to collapse. It's a crash they willingly take part to: like J. D. Ballard, it could be the only real experience they'll have been through for years.



Gucci Menswear, CRUISE 2016

In *The Knockoff Economy*, Kal Raustiala and Christopher Sprigman illustrate their theory of “*piracy paradox*”. It argues that the continual survival of the fashion industry depends upon the demand, by wealthy customers, to differentiate themselves from the masses. Masses that each season, thanks indeed to counterfeits and copycats, dress ever more quickly just like the elite. And this is why high-profile labels need to release something new shortly after, and that is how the fashion wheel spins. Being a seasonal art, fashion makes sense of itself through perpetual change. Without fakes, however, fashion would be stagnant. Perhaps, it wouldn't even exist at all. But if knockoffs are what keep the industry in motion, they'll also have the power, when purposefully embraced, to accelerate its inevitable post-capitalist demise. Fashion already has started to bite its own tail: cheap copies fly off the shelves before the originals even hit the stores, and by then, no one will buy them anymore. Luxury's sales drop, and that's when its most prized value, exclusivity, is understood as wholly contextual. It may eventually lead to the quasi-post-apocalyptic scenario of so-called “*fakenomics*”, where the amateur counterfeit product, or caustic anti-fashion statement, becomes more rare and desirable in its modest production than the expensive item which inspired it – becomes collectable, like a faulty postage stamp. It sounds farfetched until you read 17-year-old Austin Butts, Instagram personality and high school dropout who goes by the moniker of Asspizza, speaking to [Dazed Digital](#) about the limited-edition bootleg tees he sold as merchandise of Kanye West's recent album, *The Life of Pablo*. “*It's more real than the real ones, you know?*” he says, “*these are more rare than the ones in the store 'cause like 10,000 kids waited in line for those and only a hundred people have the fakes, you know?*”.

Though on the rise in post-recession years, bootlegging to provoke, other than simply profit or amuse, is not exactly new. Russ Karablin was telling fashion to COMME des FUCKDOWN already mid-noughties, yet it took a decade, and A\$AP Mob, for fashion to listen. Fakenomics may still be a long way down the line, but the attitude and reaction of luxury labels already has changed remarkably: for each quixotic effort heritage brands still make, for obvious reason, to fight and prosecute copycats, there's a new high-end homage to counterfeit culture. From M.I.A x Versace for SS14, inspired by Versace's own knockoffs found in East London's markets, to Moschino's Fauxschino the following summer, that featured Hermès-like ribbons, interlocked smilies like Chanel's Cs, and a monogram print à la Vuitton – a pattern that had already been borrowed in 2007, somewhat more tastefully, by Yohji Yamamoto of all people. Today, Vetements appropriates the logos of less obviously glamorous brands such as Champion or Everlast, and we have Gucci's *Real Gucci* slogans, spray-painted on bags for FW16 and the newly introduced cruise line for men, in collaboration with graffiti artist GucciGhost. It's a big step ahead in the relations between designer labels and graffiti artists *in the know*, who made a name for themselves, quite literally in GucciGhost's case, from criticising fashion or making fun of it. Remember how quickly the feud between Kidult and Marc Jacobs escalated just three years ago? After he vandalised their store windows, the brand retaliated with the release of a very expensive t-shirt printed with a photograph of the graffiti. Later, FRY launched another t-shirt printed with a picture of the Marc Jacobs' t-shirt, and just like that we were caught before time in a Gosling-Culkin loop. But things are different now, opposite extremes would seem to have learnt to play along: Demna Gvasalia gives Vetememes his blessing, and Asspizza's fake but rare tees are granted a rack at the pop-up shop right next to Kanye's own. This is nothing like admitting defeat, and more than a simple *if you can't beat them join them* solution. A new generation of high-profile designers are starting to recognise that there wouldn't be any authenticity without fakes, and that while insidious, they heighten the awareness of their brand on a much larger scale than their usual reach. Without quite endorsing it, nods to bootleg culture give their collections a sense of street credibility, the illusion of social realism – demonstrate their awareness, and respect, for the world outside the luxury bubble.