

The Content Of Any Medium Is Always Another Medium

by Silvia Bombardini



Balenciaga, SS18

Over the course of a couple of summers we've all become well-versed in telling news from guesswork, and as fussy and cautious in our consumption of it as it befits the times. Even so, broadsheets in off-white or salmon pink newsprint, the least glossy of the press, are still held in high regard in a lot of people's minds, perhaps precisely for their refusal to entice by way of gossip, polish and shine. We may buy fewer of them today than we ever did before, yet solidarity towards newspapers grows hand in hand with the viciousness they have to endure on part of those who seek to undermine their work with calls of fake news. What a newspaper is, however, and when it can call itself such, isn't always intuitive. To tell a newspaper from printed news that isn't, it may be useful to keep in mind how, in the fashion press, we've learnt to tell fashion from clothes that aren't. Both fashion and the newspaper owe to diffusion their repute: it is public accessibility and a low-cost format that makes a newspaper worth its ink, just as any one fashion is due for the annals only once all strata

of society have felt compelled to wear versions of the same. Both update periodically and both struggle, with various degrees of success, not to compromise quality to the acceleration of the cycle of production that the instantaneous appetites of the web call for. Crucially, newspapers and fashions are both defined by their currency. They're timepieces and timekeepers. What people wear, and newspapers' front pages, are how a time traveller knows when he's landed: their changing marks the passing of days, and seasons. Newspapers and fashions are signs of their time.

Although, in the case of fashion, some would say that it is *nothing but* a sign of its time. What meaning we pin onto it does not belong to a garment so much as it conveys the values and turmoil of the era. In the polarised media landscape of today, the age of post-truth and President Trump's Fake News Awards, information risks becoming just as supple, speculative. The news flattens into dressing, or camouflage – and self-reflexively like a sponge, fashion absorbs it all.

On days when ulterior motives are justly questioned, and the veracity of what we're told no longer assumed, this season's widespread use of newsprint in clothing conveys a sweeping feeling of alarm and distrust towards world's politics and the media, across the price spectrum. At the same time, it indulges the pervasive state of nostalgia that has come to stereotype millennials among the generational cohorts: it's a longing for the printed press of yore, the golden years of all-knowing newspapers, and a society with the time and curiosity to read thick print over breakfast. But Neil Postman, a millennial perhaps ahead of his time, was already writing wistfully back in the mid-80s of the 18th and 19th centuries in America – *"the most print-oriented culture ever to have existed"* – as he lamented the ills of television. In *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* he argued that by presenting news as entertainment, the *"supra-ideology"* of televisual communication, TV would disavow rational thought. Newsprint clothing is the product of our nostalgia for a printed press that's always been just not quite as good as it used to be, at the same time as it inevitably fulfils Postman's prophecy. And despite or because of it, it's as appropriate for the times we live in as a season's fashion should. Because what television didn't finish, scrolling and swiping take up in our day. In becoming fashion, the news turns at last into not only entertainment, but instant gratification. It is text that doesn't expect to be read, a visual stimulus of words – its being news is more relevant than what the news is. Without wanting to read, or not quite read, too much into it, newsprint fashion fits Marshall McLuhan's old maxim like a glove: it is, before anything, medium as message. In *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, first published in 1964, McLuhan wrote that *"the 'content' of any medium is always another medium"*, whereas its true message is the medium itself. That is to say, media affect society less with what they have to tell us, than they change our ways with their being what they are. We're fond of newspapers, not of news.

Over whatever was written on them – *"today's press agent regards the newspaper as a ventriloquist does his dummy. He can make it say what he wants"* – even back then McLuhan took note of the artistic merits of newspapers' front pages, which were, in their composition, *"symbolist and surrealist in an avant-garde way"*. A number of fashion collections have indeed taken up newsprints as they would an abstract print, from a purely

aesthetic perspective. For example, take Assembly New York's use of newspaper prints on a spaghetti strap dress and pants for spring/summer 2018. The bold words in the headlines – 'fuchsia', 'super league', 'Caribbean break', 'fast proving a winner', 'cherry', 'Brit', 'lead airline', 'Leeds', 'smiley highway', 'ups and downs', 'gold' – trace a vague narrative of rugby and escapism. This isn't a political message, there is no bite to it. If anything, it's the mundanity of the newspaper that comes into play, as the everyday pleasure it once was, and as one that is now just so uncommon it strikes us as novelty when printed on clothes. In a world swept away by 280-character news bulletins, the long-winded broadsheet has become an indulgence: as a lifestyle symbol, it speaks of the reader's casual intellectuality, and of a daily routine that allows for it. The offline newspaper could soon come to be seen, paradoxically, as a luxury.

This is interesting because until recently, the use of newsprint in clothing would represent the opposite. Schiaparelli, who did it first, designed a newsprint textile in 1935, out of newspaper clippings on herself, both positive and non. But she was inspired by members of the lower class: fishwives she'd seen on a holiday in Copenhagen, who wore newspapers on their heads, twisted and pleated into hats. 65 years later, newspaper prints were still, and once again, what we would call a bubble-up trend. John Galiano's spring 2000 haute couture collection for Dior caused great controversy – when did he not – for romanticising poverty. Inspired by the homeless on the banks of the Seine, it used Dior reviews from the fashion pages of the *International Herald Tribune* as a print. The following season, maybe because Suzy Menkes' report for the *Tribune* hadn't been quite as positive as he'd hoped, Galiano introduced newspaper prints of his own making, from the fictional *The Christian Dior Daily*. A name, accidentally, which reminds us that the very reason why a newspaper is cheap, its being meant for one day only, signifies instead when it comes to fashion a spending power above norms, even a red-carpet occasion. A slip dress from the second collection, Dior's fall/winter 2000, made yet more headlines when Sarah Jessica Parker wore it not once, but twice, as Carrie Bradshaw in *Sex and the City*. More recently in the *Sex and the City 2* film, and before that in a season 3 episode on bad karma titled 'What Goes Around Comes Around'. In spite of the criticism, and of karma, though in retrospect perhaps not his best idea, Galiano's newsprints – he had the *Galiano Gazette* for his personal line – became one of the designer's signatures, and still inspire to date their own wave of nostalgia among his fans.

At first glance, Balenciaga's newsprint for spring 2018 doesn't much differ from the ones mentioned above, as all newsprints indeed tend to look the same at a distance. But up close, the tweaks are more significant than one would expect. By making its news unreadable – a made-up language, or in code – creative director Demna Gvasalia and his team imply that we've come to read into facts what we want them to say, and our worries of being swayed by fictitious reports have left us at last with indelible biases. There's something sinister too, to the black and white portraits of smiling people all across the print. Gvasalia told *Vogue* that they "*are just pictures of happy people. I wanted some happy news. Fake news, but fake good news*". Somehow, fake good news is not at all reassuring. Its high-street counterpart could be Topshop's sold-out Fake News Jeans – popular, but ominous, in a probably less intentional way than Balenciaga's newsprint. The theme carries through to the brand's spring 2018 campaign, shot like a fake paparazzi scoop: off-centre photographs of models hiding their faces with

expensive handbags, realism and parody rolled into one. But Balenciaga isn't the first to take a jab this season at the sensationalism of tabloids, a quite specific newspaper subgenre. Kanye West's Yeezy's Season 6 lookbook is a long series of paparazzi-like snapshots of his wife Kim eating junk food or getting gas in greige spandex and bandeau bras. A second batch was released shortly after, featuring a clique of Kim Kardashian-West's lookalikes reenacting her poses in platinum blond wigs, dressed exactly the same. Paris Hilton, Kim's once boss and long-time nemesis, '00s queen of tabloids, is among them too.



Helmut Lang, SS18 – via le21eme.com

Paparazzi culture is referenced by Virgil Abloh as well. His spring 2018 collection at Off-White is a tribute to the late Princess Diana, herself a favourite of the celebrity press, in life and death. It comes with clutch bags shaped like the logos of *People*, *Time*, *Life*: the American magazines that followed her every move from across the pond. At Helmut Lang the bags are newsprint totes, which were held up at the show to shield the models' eyes and identity from spotlights and flashes. The masthead reads *Helmut Lang*, and the byline 'uncommon action in a society of repressed thoughts'. The media's ruthless exploitation of their subjects would seem to also inform Raf Simons' use of Andy Warhol's *Tunafish Disaster*, 1963, as a print in Calvin Klein 205W39NYC's spring 2018 collection. But there's a self-awareness to it that other brands lack. *Tunafish Disaster* was originally 'Two Tuna Sandwiches', a story published in Newsweek magazine about two mothers in Detroit who died of food poisoning. Though there would be plenty of articles to choose from to make his point, the designer picks one that, as an art piece, is already highly priced at auctions around the world. Tragedy becomes newsprint, becomes artwork, becomes fashion. Simons drives our attention to the fact that the fashion industry, like the art market, is a medium too – and no less guilty of exploitation than the tabloid press. That which it wants to condemn, fashion always monetises. This is not to say that it shouldn't speak up: with the great power of fashion

houses like Calvin Klein or Balenciaga comes great responsibility, and as a medium fashion's reach is vast. Or that all designers should embrace as symbiotic a relationship with tabloids as does Alexander Wang, who launched in January a capsule spring 2018 menswear collection in collaboration with Page Six, the *New York Post's* notorious gossip column. 'Winning lottery ruined my life', 'Burger Kink day', and 'if you don't want it on Page Six, don't do it' are some of the headlines there. But if the fashion world pointing its fingers at the tabloid press can come across as disingenuous, Wang's example proves a good one to follow, however pulpy the reading he favours.

Fashion is in its essence an emotional medium: it can convey our feelings of malaise or outrage, but can't reimagine itself as the bearer of news. When newspapers are under attack, however, what brands can do is use their influence to show support for the titles that deserve it. Take for instance *The New York Times*, the publication perhaps most frequently criticised in Trump's America – the President calls it "*the failing New York Times*", though the number of its subscribers has grown so much since the elections that many have spoken instead of a 'Trump Bump'. British streetwear label Unknown London makes fun of it, with a fake-news moon landing newsprint under the *NYT* masthead. Back in 1969, the landing of Apollo 11 was news outlandish enough to spawn popular disbelief, and that suspicion gave rise to conspiracy theories which survive to this day. To doubt the press on principle, as it happens, isn't always proof of a discerning mind. But *The New York Times* logo itself becomes a badge of honour, in the fall/winter 2018 collection of Études, as white gothic lettering on black scarves and hoodies, and at Sacai, where the slogan 'Truth. It's more important now than ever.' from *The Times'* own 'Truth is Hard' campaign is printed on tees and fleeces. Fashion and the newspaper, on the same page at last. And if fashion, like the newspaper, is a sign of its time, maybe that's not quite all it is. As we browse in June through the winter shows, we might want to take these as a promising sign of the times that are yet to come, too.