

FASHION AS A POLITICAL VOICE

By

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A Thesis Submitted to The W.A. Franke Honors College

In Partial Fulfillment of the bachelor's degree
With Honors in

Fashion Industry's Science and Technology

THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

M A Y 2 0 2 3

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Abstract

This paper examines the development of fashion as a language and form of communication throughout history into the political voice it has embodied today and in more recent history. Since around the Victorian Age, there is evidence of fashion being used as a form of communication and as a way to send a message. Each decision a person or group makes about what to wear delivers a statement to the world, whether that be about their job, personality, values, likes, political ideals, and much more. This unrelenting power of fashion has been harnessed by those in power and with high status to further their agendas, whether in a negative manner, such as in World War II, or in a positive manner, such as Mary Quant's quest for liberation for women. Starting in the early twentieth century, this means of communication through fashion continued to evolve into using fashion as a political voice and to make a statement about one's political beliefs and values. Using fashion in this way has been nothing short of influential, and has helped to effect universal change in so many ways, which are further explored throughout this paper.

I. History

A. Fashion as a Form of Communication

1. Each Piece of Clothing You Buy and Wear Makes a Statement

Every piece of clothing created and worn all around the world is so much more than just pieces of fabric sewn together. The pieces of fabric come together to form a cohesive garment that has the power to communicate and tell a story. The strength of this communication and story can vary from garment to garment, but there is always some form of communication and statement being made. In an interview with the Wall Street Journal in 2007, Miuccia Prada said that “what you wear is how you present yourself to the world, especially today, when human contact is so quick. Fashion is instant language.”¹ A feminist writer, Virginia Woolf, once said that “clothes change our view of the world, and the world’s view of us.”²

Throughout history, fashion as a language has had various impacts on societies, regimes, and class systems. Clothes can serve as a cultural force to allow communities, cultures, and individuals to “help us develop and communicate our identities.”³ Social psychologists and experts of communication believe that the four ways a person develops their identity are “communication with others, roles we assume, group membership and self-labels,” which are four aspects that heavily influence a person’s clothing choices and appearance on a daily basis.⁴ These parts of people’s life affect which clothes they may be required or choose to wear, based on their daily life and activities or work. We can learn about anyone wearing any outfit, whether that is a shirt with a slogan, a dress, all one color, a school uniform, a firefighter’s suit, scrubs, or

¹ Cloud, David. “Clothing Is a Language.” *Way of Life Literature*, 23 Aug. 2017, <https://www.wayoflife.org/reports/clothing-is-a-language.php>.

² Cloud, David. “Clothing Is a Language.”

³ Lascity, Myles Ethan. *Communicating Fashion: Clothing, Culture, and Media*. Bloomsbury Visual Arts/Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2021.

⁴ Lascity, Myles Ethan. *Communicating Fashion...*

much more. Clothing and visuals are a language in which we can communicate and we can make assumptions about what a person may do for a living, for fun, and who they enjoy socializing with based on their status. People will even often change their outfits or clothing choices based on who they are interacting with or what type of social or work setting they are entering. This is an essential part of nonverbal communication that would not be possible with clothes and fashion.

2. Examples

a) Couture Seamstress in Concentration Camp/Adolf Hitler

Even an extremist national and political leader, Adolf Hitler, recognized the strength of fashion and had the desire to create a fashion regime. The Third Reich and Germany's inner workings under Hitler can all be learned and examined from "German high fashion and ready-to-wear industries; the National Socialists' fashion-related propaganda, proposals, policies, and activities; the cultural and economic importance of fashion in Germany; the political meanings the Nazis invested in particular images and fashions; the female representations that emanated from contemporary magazines and advertisements; the fashioned images the regime offered to its female citizens for adoption; and the personal choices women made in their clothing and appearance."⁵ Germans silently inspected each other and the Jewish individuals in order to gain a sense of class and level of respect, all communicated through female fashion.⁶ Once Adolf Hitler was appointed as the chancellor of Germany, the Nazi-Directed German Labor Front took over and abolished trade unions and leftist organizations in all industries, including the fashion industry.⁷ The Nazi regime used fashion as an avenue to make strong statements

⁵ Guenther, Irene., and Bloomsbury. *Nazi Chic? : Fashioning Women in the Third Reich*. Oxford ; New York: Berg, 2004. Print.

⁶ Guenther, Irene., and Bloomsbury. *Nazi Chic...*"

⁷ Guenther, Irene., and Bloomsbury. *Nazi Chic...*"

about purifying the fashion industry. These statements were outwardly promoted through propaganda as Germany rivaling France in the fashion industry, but were actually just another way to promote “anti-Semitism, radical nationalism and economic considerations” for the Nazis.⁸ Jews had been successful in the fashion industry “in department stores, leading women’s magazines, high fashion salons, and especially the *Konfektion* or ready-to-wear industry throughout the 1920s [which] had brought them few accolades and much resentment in Germany.”⁹ The new regime in Germany created the nationalistic German Fashion Institute as a way to drown out what they thought was cheap, trashy clothing and the international clothing that was making its way to too many German consumers.¹⁰ Hitler not only wanted to purify the people in Germany, but the clothing industry as well.¹¹ This new ‘German fashion’ was not entirely successful, as many designs were similar to French designs and “the ostracism of Jews from the realms of the German fashion world took far longer than many staunch Nazis had hoped...[and] brought about irreparable economic damage and irretrievable cultural loss to German Jews and to the German nation.”¹²

Additionally, the Jewish people in Germany continued to have a strong influence and hand in the fashion created in Germany during World War II, even during the time of the concentration camps. For example, at Auschwitz in 1943, 23 women that were held prisoner in the concentration camp were assigned to work in the sewing room, to tailor and “produce extensive and stylish wardrobes” of the SS female guards and wives of the powerful commandants in the camps.¹³ The prisoners had to produce two custom dresses every week, as

⁸ Guenther, Irene., and Bloomsbury. *Nazi Chic...*”

⁹ Guenther, Irene., and Bloomsbury. *Nazi Chic...*”

¹⁰ Guenther, Irene., and Bloomsbury. *Nazi Chic...*”

¹¹ Guenther, Irene., and Bloomsbury. *Nazi Chic...*”

¹² Guenther, Irene., and Bloomsbury. *Nazi Chic...*”

¹³ Guenther, Irene., and Bloomsbury. *Nazi Chic...*”

well as other clothes, lingerie, and exquisite evening gowns of the highest quality and fashion, to be worn to Nazi-held parties, celebrations, and social events.¹⁴ Even in a time when Hitler and the Nazis wanted to purify Germany of the Jews, including throughout the fashion industry, the Jews' well-known talents for fashion and sewing were still being used and showing up in the Nazi's styles when they went out.¹⁵ Even an SS female guard said, "I never knew that Jewesses could work, let alone, so beautifully."¹⁶

b) Mary Quant

Mary Quant is another clear example of a fashion designer and figure who sent out clear communications and messages through both her fashion choices to wear and designs she created. She was an influential British fashion designer in the 1960's who popularized and invented the mini-skirt and hot pants, revolutionizing fashion.¹⁷ These new and other styles revolutionized fashion not just because they were new and different, but because of the dramatic and polarizing statement they made. In the time of the swinging sixties, these new styles were representative of sexual liberation for women and pushing forward more unisex and androgynous fashion trends, breaking down traditional gender barriers.¹⁸ Mary Quant communicated these statements and ideas through mixing men and women's attire and creating more free-flowing, gender-fluid fashion.¹⁹ She also created traditional menswear designs for women to wear on the runway, including looks that featured pants, ties, suit jackets, and short hair.²⁰ This may not seem too far-fetched at this moment in time, but in the 1960's, this was both a political and fashion statement about the role of women in society. This practice was given the name, "subverted

¹⁴ Guenther, Irene., and Bloomsbury. *Nazi Chic...*"

¹⁵ Guenther, Irene., and Bloomsbury. *Nazi Chic...*"

¹⁶ Guenther, Irene., and Bloomsbury. *Nazi Chic...*"

¹⁷ Cloud, David. "Clothing Is a Language."

¹⁸ Cloud, David. "Clothing Is a Language."

¹⁹ Lascity, Myles Ethan. *Communicating Fashion...*

²⁰ Cloud, David. "Clothing Is a Language."

menswear,” and became so iconic that it was featured in the Victoria & Albert Museum in London in 2019, with the title “Boys Will Be Girls,” and the description, “Trousers are considered inappropriate for women [but] Quant wears them anywhere she wants.”²¹ Mary Quant also was known for her very short, unisex hairstyle and attitude for a relaxed and more open sexuality for all people.²² This was a common trend at the time, as homosexuality was decriminalized in 1967.²³ Other quotes about Mary Quant at the exhibition in London included “using fashion to question hierarchies and gender rules,” “a rebellious approach to established gender norms,” “mocking religion,” “an independent style,” “self-expression,” and “freedom.”²⁴ Quant wanted women to feel comfortable and free in what they wore and how they moved, while also taking back gender roles and positions in society that had previously been reserved for men.²⁵ She also made the statement that women should be able to feel young and not feel like they had to grow up, by putting women in some of her girl’s designs.²⁶ The miniskirt and other designs by Mary Quant have become international symbols and signs of women’s liberation and freedom.

c) Catherine Hill

Like Mary Quant, Catherine Hill is another strong example of fashion being used as a conduit for communication and strong statements. She was a Holocaust survivor and owner/creator of the Canadian luxury fashion retailer, ‘Chez Catherine,’ which had over 30 locations that carried bold luxury brands that were not as commonplace.²⁷ Before founding this

²¹ Cloud, David. “Clothing Is a Language.”

²² Lascity, Myles Ethan. *Communicating Fashion...*

²³ Cloud, David. “Clothing Is a Language.”

²⁴ Cloud, David. “Clothing Is a Language.”

²⁵ Lascity, Myles Ethan. *Communicating Fashion...*

²⁶ Cloud, David. “Clothing Is a Language.”

²⁷ Patterson, Craig. “In Memoriam: Catherine Hill, Founder of Luxury Retailer 'Chez Catherine'.” *Retail Insider*, 18 Oct. 2020,

iconic retailer, Catherine Hill was already making waves in her fashion identity through statements in her clothing as a young child and throughout her time in and after the Holocaust. Catherine grew up in a Jewish family, where—like food, clothes were of great significance, representing traditions and having new clothes for various religious high holidays like Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Passover.²⁸ These new outfits and symbols of doing well as a family and in society made a statement to God and to her neighbors. Later, when Jewish families started to be persecuted in Hungary, Catherine found herself sewing yellow stars onto all of her clothes.²⁹ Whether she was wearing “a silk dress or a workman’s shirt,” the only statement she felt like she was making now through her clothing was that she was a ‘Jew’ and was reduced to the same status as everyone else wearing that star³⁰ Catherine felt that this star had taken away all of her power to communicate and show her identity through her clothing choices.³¹

Upon arrival at the concentration camps at Auschwitz, the Jewish families had worn their most luxurious dresses, suits, dancing shoes, and fur hems filled with jewels in case they needed money wherever they were being taken.³² The families were stripped and the clothes were piled up and sent to civilians in Germany as a reward from Hitler, and they were worn out once again to “cafés and nightclubs while their former owners lay naked in mass graves.”³³ The Germans were making a strong statement about their values and societal position when wearing these clothes from those whom they persecuted. In contrast, the Jewish people who were selected to stay at the concentration camps, rather than go straight to the gas chambers, lost their clothing

<https://retail-insider.com/retail-insider/2020/06/in-memoriam-catherine-hill-founder-of-luxury-re-tailer-chez-catherine/>.

²⁸ Grant, Linda. *The Thoughtful Dresser: The Art of Adornment, the Pleasures of Shopping, and Why Clothes Matter*. Scribner, 2010.

²⁹ Grant, Linda. *The Thoughtful Dresser*...

³⁰ Grant, Linda. *The Thoughtful Dresser*...

³¹ Grant, Linda. *The Thoughtful Dresser*...

³² Grant, Linda. *The Thoughtful Dresser*...

³³ Grant, Linda. *The Thoughtful Dresser*...

and in turn, lost their ability to communicate through clothing entirely. Their clothes were taken and their heads were shaved. They were put in a burlap dress and reduced to nothing, powerless to communicate and powerless to be anything more than the number tattooed on their arm.

However, Catherine had a deeper understanding of the power of clothing, and fought against this sense of feeling powerless. She sought out a way to show her identity, despite the possible consequences. In the concentration camp, she used the bottom of her burlap dress to make a ribbon to tie in a bow around her ears, just like her mother had used to tie ribbons in her dark hair.³⁴ She noted later that she “acted from a natural urge, there was no goal.”³⁵ It was intuitive for her to embrace the connection with her mother and use that part of her identity to stand out through clothing, even in the face of the polarizing and dangerous conditions at Auschwitz. Catherine’s intuition for using her voice through fashion continued once she was freed. With the only money she found at her uncle’s house after being liberated, she bought new clothes.³⁶ Taking back her voice and power to communicate through clothes was her first priority after losing it for so long.³⁷ This intuition continued into Catherine’s later life and in her retail stores in Canada. She always prioritized and aimed to find styles and feature designs in her stores that “catered to a woman who wanted to be seen.”³⁸

B. Development of Fashion and Politics Beginning in the ‘Victorian Age of Petticoats and Pants’

One of the first time periods where fashion is recognized as a means of communication is the Victorian Age. Sociologist Diana Crane has named this as fashion’s ‘social agenda,’ which “helps us fit into various social and cultural contents [and] helps us communicate (and identify)

³⁴ Grant, Linda. *The Thoughtful Dresser...*

³⁵ Grant, Linda. *The Thoughtful Dresser...*

³⁶ Grant, Linda. *The Thoughtful Dresser...*

³⁷ Grant, Linda. *The Thoughtful Dresser...*

³⁸ Patterson, Craig. “In Memoriam: Catherine Hill...”

things like gender, class, region and nationality, while also allowing us to maintain our own individuality, through our selection, wearing and styling of garments.”³⁹ When society modernized and western civilization started in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, fashion communications began as fashion “became an indicator of class status, and monopolized by the aristocracy.”⁴⁰ Groups of people in lower classes and with other statuses also began to adopt the fashion styles and systems of the elite and fashion became more of a widespread form of communication.⁴¹ Fashion helped to establish a hierarchy and social regulation, which was only accelerated by the start of fashion plates and journalism in the early 1800’s.⁴² Portraits of the wealthy were used as one of the first fashion communications to put out a message with “marriageable persons on display.”⁴³

Later, in the early twentieth century, the Suffragettes fought for the women’s right to vote in the United Kingdom, and fashion played an important role in the communications of their activism. Many women’s right activists considered themselves anti-fashion and thought that fashion was conducive to female oppression, like oppressive corsets for women.⁴⁴ However, the Suffragettes recognized that fashion would make a statement no matter what and used “fashion as a weapon to further their cause,” adopting more comfortable and unisex fashion styles in exchange for the previous restrictive styles meant for women.⁴⁵ These unisex styles such as the bloomer suit ended up detracting more from the Suffragettes’ messages and the media was

³⁹ Lascity, Myles Ethan. *Communicating Fashion...*

⁴⁰ “Evolution and History of Fashion Communications.” *Evolving Influence*, 19 Mar. 2010, <https://iavoid.wordpress.com/evolution-and-history-of-fashion-communications/>.

⁴¹ “Evolution and History of Fashion Communications.”

⁴² Lyon, Shire. “The Evolution of Fashion Journalism from Print to Digital.” *FG MAGAZINE*, 29 June 2021, <https://thefashionglobe.com/fashion-journalism>.

⁴³ Lyon, Shire. “The Evolution of Fashion Journalism...”

⁴⁴ Gaibova, Durdona. “Votes & Petticoats.” *The Fashion of Suffrage · Votes & Petticoats · Johns Hopkins University*, Omeka, <https://exhibits.library.jhu.edu/omeka-s/s/VotesAndPetticoats/page/the-fashion-of-suffrage>.

⁴⁵ Gaibova, Durdona. “Votes & Petticoats.”

depicting the women as “unattractive outsiders in men’s pants, thick glasses, and unappealing galoshes. By stigmatizing strong-minded women who wanted equality as unfeminine and radical, the media was isolating women from each other.”⁴⁶ As a result, the Suffragettes shifted towards a tricolor stripe as a symbol for their movement, including purple for loyalty and dignity, white for purity, and green for hope, which debuted publicly at the Women’s Rally in 1908 at Hyde Park with over 300,000 people in support and attendance.⁴⁷ The colors were worn as a duty and a privilege for the Suffragettes to rebrand themselves as empowered women who could use styles to their advantage.⁴⁸ This clearly worked because trending retail shops throughout London started to promote the movement by selling “ribbons, rosettes, hats, badges, belts, jewelry, underwear, garments, shoes, and home goods in the tricolor motif” and in 1918, women were legally given the right to vote in the United Kingdom.⁴⁹ The power of the movement and statements made through the fashion styles of the Suffragettes even spread to the United States, where women were legally given the right to vote just two years later, in 1920.⁵⁰

II. Fashion Communication that is Damaging

A. Coco Chanel

Gabrielle ‘Coco’ Chanel is and will always be one of the most iconic and well-known fashion designers and brands in the luxury fashion space. She was a French fashion designer, business woman, and pioneer of women’s fashion in the early 20th century, “fundamentally redefining women’s style into what we know today, ridding closets of frumpy Victorian gowns and introducing effortlessly chic pieces like the ‘little black dress.’”⁵¹ However, in contrast with

⁴⁶ Shen, Ann. *Nevertheless, She Wore It: 50 Iconic Fashion Moments*. Chronicle Books, 2020.

⁴⁷ Shen, Ann. *Nevertheless, She Wore It...*

⁴⁸ Shen, Ann. *Nevertheless, She Wore It...*

⁴⁹ Shen, Ann. *Nevertheless, She Wore It...*

⁵⁰ Shen, Ann. *Nevertheless, She Wore It...*

⁵¹ Albanesi, Melanie. “Coco Chanel: Fashion Designer, Nazi Informant.” *PBS*, Public Broadcasting Service, 3 Jan. 2022,

her Parisian and high fashion lifestyle for women, Chanel also came to be known as a Nazi informant and sympathizer throughout World War II in the 1940's, which was a secret at the time.⁵²

Coco Chanel grew up poor and in orphanages, but in her 20's, 30's, and 40's, she rose up in society living with various wealthy men in elite social circles⁵³ to acquire her high tastes and eventually establish herself as the "epitome of French good taste."⁵⁴ She used this high taste to create the iconic little black dress, which was a design as revolutionary for women's fashion and as radical as the "wheel or the fork."⁵⁵ It was simple, yet elegant, and created a new identity for "a woman whose dress was *without allusion*."⁵⁶ When World War II and the persecution of the Jewish people started to gain momentum and the violence arrived in France, Chanel found herself in cahoots with the elite and as she was so well connected with powerful figures across Europe, she quickly became entangled in a social circle of powerful Nazi leaders.⁵⁷ Notably, Chanel spent the Nazi Occupation of France as the mistress of 'Spatz,' also known as Baron Hans Gunther von Dincklage, a highly ranked German spy and intelligence officer, for over ten years.⁵⁸ Through this relationship and her social circles, Chanel morphed into a German secret agent of her own, using her opportunistic attitudes and elite social connections to free her nephew, André Palasse from a German POW camp,⁵⁹ as well as to use the Nazis' aryianization of

<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/roadshow/stories/articles/2022/1/3/coco-chanel-fashion-designer-and-nazi-informant>.

⁵² Albanesi, Melanie. "Coco Chanel: Fashion Designer, Nazi Informant."

⁵³ Albanesi, Melanie. "Coco Chanel: Fashion Designer, Nazi Informant."

⁵⁴ Vaughan, Hal. *Sleeping with the Enemy: Coco Chanel's Secret War*. Vintage Books, 2012.

⁵⁵ Grant, Linda. *The Thoughtful Dresser*...

⁵⁶ Grant, Linda. *The Thoughtful Dresser*...

⁵⁷ Vaughan, Hal. *Sleeping with the Enemy*...

⁵⁸ Vaughan, Hal. *Sleeping with the Enemy*...

⁵⁹ Warner, Judith. "Was Coco Chanel a Nazi Agent?" *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 2 Sept. 2011,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/04/books/review/sleeping-with-the-enemy-coco-channels-secret-war-by-hal-vaughan-book-review.html>.

property laws to take control of her perfume commodities from the Jewish Wertheimer brothers.⁶⁰ Some of Chanel's involvements as a Nazi agent that have been uncovered over the years include: "Chanel and Baron von Dincklage traveled to bombed-out Berlin in 1943 to offer Chanel's services as an agent to SS Reichsführer Heinrich Himmler, Chanel, after visiting Berlin, undertook a second mission to Madrid for SS general Walter Schellenberg, Himmler's chief of SS intelligence, Dincklage had been a German military intelligence officer since after WWI: Abwehr agent F- 8680, Chanel was a paid agent of Walter Schellenberg, and Dincklage worked for the Abwehr and the Gestapo in France and for the Abwehr in Switzerland and, later, during the occupation of Paris."⁶¹

As discovered from police files from during wartime and old, recently declassified intelligence archives, one of Chanel's biggest missions as a German agent in 1943 was a covert operation code-named Modellhut,⁶² where she used her contacts to send a message from the SS to Winston Churchill "stating that a number of leading Nazis wanted to break with Adolf Hitler and negotiate a separate peace with England."⁶³ The mission went awry and Chanel was named as a Nazi informant to the authorities by her friend Bate in Madrid, although her arrest by the French Government was short-lived after her interrogation which was never released to the public, although it is likely that her elite connections to Churchill aided in her release.⁶⁴ The full extent and depth of Chanel and Dincklage's Nazi involvement will likely never be fully realized or understood, as competing reports and covered up traces of the elites continue to circulate.⁶⁵ In

⁶⁰ Vaughan, Hal. *Sleeping with the Enemy...*

⁶¹ Vaughan, Hal. *Sleeping with the Enemy...*

⁶² Vaughan, Hal. *Sleeping with the Enemy...*

⁶³ Warner, Judith. "Was Coco Chanel a Nazi Agent?"

⁶⁴ Albanesi, Melanie. "Coco Chanel: Fashion Designer, Nazi Informant."

⁶⁵ Vaughan, Hal. *Sleeping with the Enemy...*

the years following the war, Chanel eventually returned back to designing clothing and living her luxurious lifestyle in France, dressing the wealthy and famous.⁶⁶

B. How Consumers Say a Lot

When consumers persist in buying products with the ‘Chanel’ label, despite the original designer’s dark and troubled history, they are making a clear statement. Although Coco Chanel is no longer alive and designing for the label, she is still the creator of Chanel and her name and likeness is still heavily tied to all products and designs created by the brand today. When people buy and wear any products associated with Chanel, there is a strong tie of Coco Chanel’s social climbing and anti-Semitic values tied to that product. There is a strong debate in the fashion and communication world about whether a consumer is celebrating the designer or the brand when purchasing and wearing luxury clothing, or whether it even makes a difference at all. Either way, the consumer has an even stronger power to communicate through the clothes they choose to buy and wear than the designer does. The designer is one person, and while they certainly can make a statement through their designs, the mass population of consumers who choose to wear the clothing or not are the ones with the most powerful form of communication and statements.

III. Political Fashion Communication Today

A. Political Climate Today in Fashion

1. Introduction

“Expressing yourself as a woman is a political act. Our clothing and bodies have too often been subject to scrutiny by a patriarchal structure that works to hold us down. As long as women’s bodies are governed by others, the personal will always be political.”⁶⁷ Clothing choices and styles for women have evolved dramatically over time, from restrictive corsets and

⁶⁶ Albanesi, Melanie. “Coco Chanel: Fashion Designer, Nazi Informant.”

⁶⁷ Shen, Ann. *Nevertheless, She Wore It...*

long dresses that cover a woman up, to more freedom in what women choose to wear today.

Many women in politics have used clothing to make a statement about their role in society and to have successfully harnessed the power of clothing to communicate a message.

2. Ruth Bader Ginsburg

Ruth Bader Ginsburg is an excellent example of an icon in fashion and a woman who has been known to make a statement through her style, even when she is not speaking at all.

Throughout her time in the United States Supreme Court, Justice Ginsburg, along with Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, have embraced collars as a way to claim the traditional judicial robe as their own. This black judicial robe was designed and meant for men to wear, with an opening at the top to accommodate a shirt collar and a tie.⁶⁸ These women used collars as a way to represent women in the judicial field and make an empowering statement about the half of the country that they represent through being female.⁶⁹ Justice Ginsburg even wore different collars for different judicial occasions, the most famous being her dissent collar, which was a beaded collar inspired by medieval armor.⁷⁰ In addition to the statement being made with the collars alone, this specific collar became infamously known as her dissent collar, which she silently communicated with when she wore it on days where she was dissenting from the majority opinion in the Supreme Court, as well as when she wore it the day after Donald Trump was elected to office.⁷¹ “By adapting a costume that didn’t account for female physicality,” these women in positions of power are “reminders of how important it is for women to be seen in the public sphere.”⁷²

3. Michelle Obama

⁶⁸ Shen, Ann. *Nevertheless, She Wore It...*

⁶⁹ Shen, Ann. *Nevertheless, She Wore It...*

⁷⁰ Shen, Ann. *Nevertheless, She Wore It...*

⁷¹ Shen, Ann. *Nevertheless, She Wore It...*

⁷² Shen, Ann. *Nevertheless, She Wore It...*

One example of a class system and particular group that demonstrates fashion as communication are the First Ladies in the White House in the United States. Three well-known First Ladies that exemplify this and are known for their fashion statements are Michelle Obama, Jackie Kennedy, and Melania Trump. Michelle Obama has broken barriers in the fashion and political worlds with outfits that have gained nation-wide attention and broken down both sexist and racist attitudes towards First Ladies in the White House. In contrast with these groundbreaking looks at glamorous events, Obama has also been known to slip out of the White House to go shopping at Target, embracing the looks of the everyday woman.⁷³ One of the biggest clothing choices that has drawn attention from Michelle Obama has been sleeveless shift dresses.⁷⁴ Although not intended to be any type of politically charged statement about gender or race, the nation took great note of her choice to show her arms at Barack Obama's first congressional address and many times afterward.⁷⁵ Intentional or not, this choice was taken as a statement and pointed out differences in how First Ladies are treated compared to their male counterparts, as well as with First Ladies of other races.⁷⁶ Jackie Kennedy was also known to wear sleeveless shift dresses quite regularly without the same types of criticism directed at Obama, and as a result, "the critiques of Michelle Obama's dress often reeked of racism and sexism, a joint prejudice called misogynoir (coined by queer Black feminist Moya Bailey). The critics were uncomfortable with a first lady showing her arms because it was this first lady—the first Black first lady, with the first Black president. She presented herself as intelligent, thoughtful, compassionate."⁷⁷ These dresses created a daring and controversial statement that a

⁷³ Lascity, Myles Ethan. *Communicating Fashion...*

⁷⁴ Shen, Ann. *Nevertheless, She Wore It...*

⁷⁵ Shen, Ann. *Nevertheless, She Wore It...*

⁷⁶ Shen, Ann. *Nevertheless, She Wore It...*

⁷⁷ Shen, Ann. *Nevertheless, She Wore It...*

person, whatever gender or race, does not have to be intelligent or attractive, and that both can exist in the same realm.

4. Jackie Kennedy

Jackie Kennedy was another First Lady famous for her fashion styles and statement looks. One look in particular that made a mark in the fashion world and let people know who she was and all about her, was her wedding gown.⁷⁸ This gown was designed by Ann Lowe, an African-American designer with “a reputation for designing dreamlike, almost fairy-tale dresses.”⁷⁹ Her designs always spoke of elegance and the highest quality for the most wealthy and elite socialite clients.⁸⁰ Kennedy’s wedding gown created by Ann Lowe out of silk taffeta in 1953 was no exception.⁸¹ Photos of this dress and American style icon were widely circulated and printed in the press all over the country. However, at the time, Kennedy did not give credit to this female, Black designer for her wedding dress.⁸² When asked by reporters who designed her exquisite gown, she replied with, “a colored dressmaker did it.”⁸³ The American chosen brand for the dress was supposed to make a statement and send a message of diplomacy, rather than choosing a French designer. The snubbing of the designer by Kennedy sent a bigger message however, even if it was just because she did not end up liking the dress, as many have speculated.

5. Melania Trump

Another First Lady that has become well known for political statements and communication through fashion is Melania Trump. She was the First Lady in the White House from 2017 to 2021, under former President Donald Trump. In 2018, Melania was participating

⁷⁸ Burholt, Eleanor. “1966-1967 – Ann Lowe, American Beauty Dress.” *Fashion History Timeline*, 13 July 2020, <https://fashionhistory.fitnyc.edu/1966-lowe-american-beauty/>.

⁷⁹ Burholt, Eleanor. “1966-1967 – Ann Lowe, American Beauty Dress.”

⁸⁰ Burholt, Eleanor. “1966-1967 – Ann Lowe, American Beauty Dress.”

⁸¹ Burholt, Eleanor. “1966-1967 – Ann Lowe, American Beauty Dress.”

⁸² Burholt, Eleanor. “1966-1967 – Ann Lowe, American Beauty Dress.”

⁸³ Burholt, Eleanor. “1966-1967 – Ann Lowe, American Beauty Dress.”

on a surprise trip taken to visit migrant children that were being held at the United States and Mexico border.⁸⁴ This trip was following a highly controversial decision made by the Trump administration that resulted in many migrant families that were being held at the border to be deported and separated, in order to push back against undocumented immigrants.⁸⁵ This decision was opposed by many former First Ladies, including Michelle Obama, Hillary Clinton, Laura Bush, Rosalynn Carter, and supposedly Melania Trump.⁸⁶ But then, when Melania went on the trip to the border, she made a big political statement through her jacket. She wore an olive green jacket with big words painted across the back that said “I REALLY DON’T CARE. DO U?”⁸⁷ There have been many controversial debates about whether this was just a jacket, or was a political statement directed towards the media as Melania said, or a message directed at the children and the migrant family crisis.⁸⁸ Either way, the jacket was most definitely a political statement of great importance and powerfully caught the attention of both the fashion and political worlds.

B. Political Voice Through Fashion

As the fashion and political worlds have continued to evolve and intersect at various points, fashion has continued to be used by worldwide designers in more intentional ways of communicating political messages. These representations of political ideas have been sometimes more successful than they have been other times. Designs custom made for and worn by celebrities and political figures have been a particular point of controversy and attention. For example, at the 2021 Met Gala, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC), Cara Delevigne, and Carolyn Maloney all wore dresses with large messages printed on them, which wrote “Tax the Rich,”

⁸⁴ Lascity, Myles Ethan. *Communicating Fashion...*

⁸⁵ Lascity, Myles Ethan. *Communicating Fashion...*

⁸⁶ Lascity, Myles Ethan. *Communicating Fashion...*

⁸⁷ Lascity, Myles Ethan. *Communicating Fashion...*

⁸⁸ Lascity, Myles Ethan. *Communicating Fashion...*

“Peg the Patriarchy,” and “Equal rights for women,” respectively.⁸⁹ These very literal and Instagram-friendly statements had varying levels of success and felt to many like performative activism of the liberal elite.⁹⁰ For example, while AOC had good intentions with her message, many, including fashion critic Vanessa Friedman, called her out for her ‘complicated proposition’ to “Tax the Rich” while wearing an extravagant designer Brother Vellies gown at an event where exclusive tickets cost \$35,000.⁹¹ AOC argued the effectiveness of her dress and how she went viral by pointing out a clear rise in online web searches about taxation shortly after the Met Gala.⁹² Despite this, achieving real results and using fashion subtly and effectively within the political identities of new generations has been much more revolutionary than any slogans or viral social media moments.

Those designers who are directly involved and affected with certain political issues have had the most successful unions of politics and fashion throughout history by making subtle statements that feel personal and genuine. An iconic moment that achieved this perfect balance was the women’s tuxedo created and designed by Yves Saint Laurent in 1967.⁹³ This new style for women was groundbreaking at a time of sexual liberation and building on women’s equality in the period of Second-Wave Feminism in the Western world.⁹⁴ Without using any literal or obvious slogans, the tuxedo for women which came in many forms over the following years was the quintessential message and concept of sexual liberation, to “adapt the rigor and elegance of the male dress to the female body...exchange the pre-established roles.”⁹⁵ Other moments that

⁸⁹ Salamone, Lorenzo. “Does Fashion Still Know How to Talk about Politics?” *Nss Magazine*, Nss Magazine, 15 Sept. 2021, <https://www.nssmag.com/en/fashion/27485/fashion-politics-ocasio-cortez>.

⁹⁰ Salamone, Lorenzo. “Does Fashion Still Know...”

⁹¹ Salamone, Lorenzo. “Does Fashion Still Know...”

⁹² Salamone, Lorenzo. “Does Fashion Still Know...”

⁹³ Salamone, Lorenzo. “Does Fashion Still Know...”

⁹⁴ Salamone, Lorenzo. “Does Fashion Still Know...”

⁹⁵ Salamone, Lorenzo. “Does Fashion Still Know...”

have stood out include when Telfar Clemens, an American fashion designer, used iconoclasm, white scarves in the style of abolitionists, a t-shirt that read “Black Lives Matter,” and the image of a burnt-out American flag⁹⁶ in his AW19 show to point out the contradictions of American national identity, Thebe Magugu, a South African fashion designer, making statements about corruption in South Africa throughout his collections, and the Missoni (an Italian luxury and knitwear leisure brand) runway in Italy featuring models wearing pussy hats in 2017 after misogynistic statements about women by Donald Trump, and then donating the proceeds to charities.⁹⁷ Fashion has always been and will always be political, but the type of messaging and use of activism through fashion will greatly affect the type of results fashion can achieve. A lasting social performance and following are created by “the political statements [that] concern designers and their communities – without extending to broader and therefore unmanageable topics.”⁹⁸ Three of the most successful and well-known designers to attempt this type of political activism through fashion have been Christian Dior, Vivienne Westwood, and Pyer Moss.

C. Three Case Studies

1. Christian Dior

Christian Dior was one of the first designers to express his political views through his designs and share them with the world. Although he actually only designed for ten years in France, he certainly made the most of them and showed the world who he was through his collections in that decade from 1947 to 1957.⁹⁹ “Having a clear point of view is important because by truly knowing what you believe in, you will have a solid opinion which then

⁹⁶ Waters, Jamie. “Vivienne Westwood's Top Ten Political Moments.”

⁹⁷ Salamone, Lorenzo. “Does Fashion Still Know...”

⁹⁸ Salamone, Lorenzo. “Does Fashion Still Know...”

⁹⁹ Luna, Javier. “The Five Political Skills That Made Christian Dior Iconic: Politics + Fashion: Political Fashion Blog.” *Politics + Fashion | Political Fashion Blog*, 14 Jan. 2022, <https://www.political.fashion/posts/the-five-political-skills-that-made-christian-dior-iconic>.

translates into the values and messages of the work you are doing.”¹⁰⁰ Dior lived and started designing in a post war era when the world was very focused on economic choices and so fashion became minimalistic, with cheaper, modest textiles and little attention to design or high fashion. However, Dior’s designs created a new sense of optimism after the war, and portrayed a fresh start, emphasizing that “elegance and sophistication in clothes could bring a sense of joy to the user, so his clothes reflected that idea.”¹⁰¹ Dior stunned the world with the New Look in 1947 as a visual representation and identity of optimism and hope after the war. It encapsulated the idea of dressing in elegance to overcome the hardships of the war and help the world to move on. “The job of a fashion designer goes beyond creating aesthetically pleasing clothes. It is about making designs that represent what people think and want because these are the clothes that consumers will buy and wear. Fashion is not arbitrary. Every decision regarding design and textile selection should be thought out thoroughly in order to create successful designs.”¹⁰²

Christian Dior’s sister, Catherine Dior, was a member of the French Resistance during World War II, and was arrested by the Gestapo and sent to the Ravensbruck concentration camp, where she was tortured.¹⁰³ She was eventually liberated by Soviet soldiers and spent most of the rest of her life working with flowers, inspiring Christian Dior’s fascination with fragrances and flowery scents, including his most famous perfume named after Catherine, ‘Miss Dior.’¹⁰⁴ When Christian Dior debuted his New Look collection, he had the whole room smelling of ‘Miss Dior’ and wanted it to represent love and “a sense of liberty, relief, and empowerment that reminded him of his sister. His ability to use these powerful emotions as an inspiration to one of his

¹⁰⁰ Luna, Javier. “The Five Political Skills That Made Christian Dior Iconic...”

¹⁰¹ Luna, Javier. “The Five Political Skills That Made Christian Dior Iconic...”

¹⁰² Luna, Javier. “The Five Political Skills That Made Christian Dior Iconic...”

¹⁰³ Borrelli-Persson, Laird. “Sister Act: A Closer Look at the Quietly Influential Life of Catherine Dior.” *Vogue*, Vogue, 20 Aug. 2021, <https://www.vogue.com/article/a-closer-look-at-the-quietly-influential-life-of-catherine-dior>.

¹⁰⁴ Borrelli-Persson, Laird. “Sister Act: A Closer Look at the Quietly...”

professional projects helped him to be a great storyteller that makes Miss Dior one of the most popular fragrances to this day.”¹⁰⁵ The Dior label still uses florals throughout its collections and fragrances in Catherine’s honor and to communicate with the world a strong point of view and a sense of courage, love, and empowerment.¹⁰⁶

2. Vivienne Westwood

Vivienne Westwood, a British fashion designer, spent her lifetime as a creator and an activist rebelling against the status quo and making a slew of political statements through her collections. She used her global platform and outspoken views to address a widespread variety of issues, the most memorable “tackling everything from restrictive gender norms, fracking and industrial farming to Scottish independence, Wikileaks and Margaret Thatcher.”¹⁰⁷ In 1977, Westwood made one of her first remarkable political statements when she created controversial t-shirts with bold, red swastikas on them as a form of protest against the Dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet in Chile.¹⁰⁸ The punk political shirts also featured an inverted image of Jesus on a cross, text that read ‘DESTROY,’ and lyrics from the Sex Pistols.¹⁰⁹ Westwood wanted to stand up to the dictatorship and unjust torture and to challenge and show a lack of submissive acceptance of fascist values and traditional generations.¹¹⁰ Another key moment for Westwood came in 1989, when she disguised herself as Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher on the cover of *Tatler* Magazine on April Fools.¹¹¹ Westwood wore a dress that Thatcher had ordered and the image was all over the billboards in London during fashion week in 1989, promoting Westwood’s opinions on

¹⁰⁵ Luna, Javier. “The Five Political Skills That Made Christian Dior Iconic...”

¹⁰⁶ Borrelli-Persson, Laird. “Sister Act: A Closer Look at the Quietly...”

¹⁰⁷ Waters, Jamie. “Vivienne Westwood's Top Ten Political Moments.” *Dazed*, 29 Dec. 2022, <https://www.dazeddigital.com/fashion/article/24335/1/vivienne-westwood-s-top-ten-political-moments>.

¹⁰⁸ Salamone, Lorenzo. “Does Fashion Still Know...”

¹⁰⁹ Waters, Jamie. “Vivienne Westwood's Top Ten Political Moments.”

¹¹⁰ Waters, Jamie. “Vivienne Westwood's Top Ten Political Moments.”

¹¹¹ Salamone, Lorenzo. “Does Fashion Still Know...”

Thatcher's uncompromising economic policies and leadership style, calling her a 'hypocrite' and pointing out the damage she caused.¹¹²

One of Westwood's longest running and continuous political messages has been about climate change. In the 1990's, along with one of her colleagues and fellow English fashion designers, Katharine Hamnett, Westwood was one of the first designers to point out and generate discussion on climate change.¹¹³ She used both subtle and loud messages, with the "transformation of the miniskirt into a statement of emancipation" and her "t-shirts printed with huge slogans."¹¹⁴ Later, at the closing ceremony of the 2012 London Paralympics, Westwood launched her campaign to address global climate change issues, Climate Revolution, when she stood on her float "dressed as an eco-warrior," holding a large banner with the words "CLIMATE REVOLUTION" written across it.¹¹⁵ In recent years leading up to her death, Westwood has continued her fight against climate change with acts such as cutting off her red hair, donating £1 million to Cool Earth, a rainforest charity, and gathering support of celebrities to financially and publicly aid Greenpeace's 'Save the Arctic' efforts.¹¹⁶

Although Vivienne Westwood has had some wildly successful moments demonstrating the meeting of fashion and politics as a strong voice, critics of the designer have called her out at times for advocating for too many causes and accusing her of simply creating noise, rather than affecting real change.¹¹⁷ One collection in particular that gained a lot of attention from these critics was Westwood's Autumn/Winter 2019 show, which was wildly ambitious and as critics

¹¹² Waters, Jamie. "Vivienne Westwood's Top Ten Political Moments."

¹¹³ Salamone, Lorenzo. "Does Fashion Still Know..."

¹¹⁴ Salamone, Lorenzo. "Does Fashion Still Know..."

¹¹⁵ Waters, Jamie. "Vivienne Westwood's Top Ten Political Moments."

¹¹⁶ Waters, Jamie. "Vivienne Westwood's Top Ten Political Moments."

¹¹⁷ Waters, Angela. "Vivienne Westwood's Political Runway Was Everything That Is Wrong with Fashion Activism." *Sleek Magazine*, 18 Feb. 2019, <https://www.sleek-mag.com/article/vivienne-westwoods-casual-activism/>.

pointed out, the show “berated audiences with activist messaging to the point where none of it was coherent.”¹¹⁸ The show featured many different slogans including “‘Politicians R Criminals / Press R Jokers,’ ‘I am a machine’ and ‘We sold our soul for CONSUMPTION / PRESS -> tell us what we want to hear. -> to HELL,’ while the models gave monologues on the runway, spouting catchy slogans like, ‘save the arctic from Shell and Putin’ and ‘culture is the enemy of consumption.’”¹¹⁹ There were also activists featured walking on the runway including the United Kingdom Greenpeace director, John Sauven, and Rose McGowan.¹²⁰ While each issue was individually important, the show featured one message after the next in the theme of a deck of cards, however each one may have drowned out the one before it. Rather than sending one unified message or making a clear statement, the punk runway show became overwhelming and “erratic, darting from critiques of Hollywood, to lecturing against advertisements, denouncing big oil companies, warning about climate change and exposing politicians.”¹²¹ This type of criticism towards a designer that has been so outspoken and created so much political change and awareness through fashion begs the question, when is activism through a somewhat superficial medium of clothing too much? Westwood definitely rides the line of too much political messaging in her designs at times, which only makes it more evident that when politics and fashion intersect, the success outcomes can vary greatly, while still being noticed and never failing to make some type of statement.

3. Pyer Moss

Pyer Moss, a mens and womenswear fashion activist label founded by Creative Director Kerby Jean-Raymond in New York, has been known for its fair share of social commentary and

¹¹⁸ Waters, Angela. “Vivienne Westwood's Political Runway...”

¹¹⁹ Waters, Angela. “Vivienne Westwood's Political Runway...”

¹²⁰ Waters, Angela. “Vivienne Westwood's Political Runway...”

¹²¹ Waters, Angela. “Vivienne Westwood's Political Runway...”

fusing personal and political ideas through fashion. In an interview with *Vogue France*, Jean-Raymond commented on his brand's values, saying that his "intention is to bring substance back into fashion," and that "Pyer Moss is less a brand than a living platform designed to fight for social change and the rights of the African-American community."¹²² As a fashion designer and just as a person directly concerned with the issues he comments on through clothing, Jean-Raymond is an example of an excellent person to be making statements that really mean something and can create real change. He uses both luxury streetwear and more accessible t-shirts with slogans as a conduit to celebrate black culture in the white establishments of America.¹²³

The first big moment where Jean-Raymond's fashion and political ideals successfully intertwined and took the world stage was at Pyer Moss' spring/summer 2016 runway show. He denounced police brutality and played a documentary style video-essay that included interviews with families of racially motivated police brutality victims and images of blood-stained clothing.¹²⁴ The video depicted Jean-Raymond's own and shared experience of white police officers stopping and attacking innocent Black youth.¹²⁵ Pyer Moss also later continued the message when he created a t-shirt that said "They Have Names," "which listed victims such as Walter Scott, who was shot in Charleston in 2015 after being pulled over for having a brake light that was not working, and Eric Garner, who died after being held in a choke hold during arrest in

¹²² Nicklaus, Olivier. "My Intention Is to Bring Substance Back into Fashion', an Interview with Kerby Jean-Raymond, Founder of Activist Label Pyer Moss." *Vogue France*, 10 Aug. 2020, <https://www.vogue.fr/fashion/article/interview-with-kerby-jean-raymond-founder-of-activist-label-pyer-moss>.

¹²³ Nicklaus, Olivier. "My Intention Is to Bring Substance..."

¹²⁴ Salamone, Lorenzo. "Does Fashion Still Know..."

¹²⁵ Nicklaus, Olivier. "My Intention Is to Bring Substance..."

New York in 2014.”¹²⁶ Eleven other names of unarmed Black men killed by police brutality also were written on the shirts.¹²⁷ In the midst of New York Fashion Week, Pyer Moss distinguished itself as a brand by taking a stand through political discourse as well as bold and award-winning designs on the catwalk.¹²⁸ Again, at Pyer Moss’ Spring/Summer 2019 runway show, the designer made another large statement when he used paintings done by Derrick Adams to show a representation and imagination of how life for the black community would be if racism had never existed.¹²⁹ Other political and fashion crossover accolades for Pyer Moss in recent years have included creating more t-shirts with a new slogan, ‘Stop calling 911 on the culture,’ “bringing to light the unfrequented story of the black cowboys from the 19th century; stories of the common black family experience; and a collection focusing on the contributions of Sister Rosetta Tharpe, the black woman who invented Rock 'N' Roll.”¹³⁰ Although Jean-Raymond has been offered positions to design in-house for luxury fashion labels, he has made it clear in his own words that he is “not interested in coming for a minute, rounding up the Black audience they wanted, and that would be all.”¹³¹ Instead, Kerby Jean-Raymond will continue to use his platform he has created through Pyer Moss to promote genuine and effective activism through fashion.

D. How Fashion Creates Influence as a Positive Political Voice

“The best rule for sending a message with fashion might just be the old cliché: show, don’t tell.”¹³² Ever since the beginning of time, but especially starting in the Victorian Ages, fashion and clothing has made the biggest statements in history throughout political and world

¹²⁶ Kingdon, Victoria. “5 Things You Need to Know about Pyer Moss.” *Harper's BAZAAR*, Harper's BAZAAR, 20 Jan. 2021, <https://www.harpersbazaar.com/uk/fashion/a24736034/who-is-pyer-moss-kerby-jean-raymond/>.

¹²⁷ Nicklaus, Olivier. “My Intention Is to Bring Substance...”

¹²⁸ Nicklaus, Olivier. “My Intention Is to Bring Substance...”

¹²⁹ Salamone, Lorenzo. “Does Fashion Still Know...”

¹³⁰ Kingdon, Victoria. “5 Things You Need to Know about Pyer Moss.”

¹³¹ Nicklaus, Olivier. “My Intention Is to Bring Substance...”

¹³² Waters, Angela. “Vivienne Westwood's Political Runway...”

events, allowing it to become a language and a form of communication. Fashion played a large role in events such as World War II and women gaining the right to vote. “The clothes we wear are a glamour we cast into the world, showing how we want to present ourselves and be seen. It’s the magic of creating our own image and communicating who we are at a glance.”¹³³ Clothes have contributed so much to change throughout history, including status and power changes as well as the liberation and freedom for women to choose what they wear. Since the Industrial Revolution, people have started to become free to express their gender, politics, ideas, and values through clothing, whether it be in a positive or negative light. Either way, “clothes can speak louder than words.”¹³⁴

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¹³⁴ Shen, Ann. *Nevertheless, She Wore It...*

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