Book review


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This book offers rich and clear critical perspectives on the luxury fashion industry and its market mediations. It relies on a multi-layered methodology and deals with a broad variety of materials: texts, images, but also objects, experiences, exhibitions, buildings, interiors. By doing so, Mouratidou demonstrates the unity (in other words: the standard form at at standard) of the politics of re-presentation in the luxury fashion industry, as well as the unity of the “sémio” approach she defends. Grounded on the semiotic analysis of discourses (from Greimas to Dondono and Fontanille), this approach includes the numerous insights of the most recent works in Communication studies. Hence the book offers also a very fruitful overview on the French tradition of critical works on cultural industries and mediations (from Barthes to Jeanneret); it also sheds light – most appropriately – on the critical theory background of this tradition (Benjamin, Adorno & Horkheimer, Debord). In addition, we must also highlight the fresh terminological creativity of Mouratidou herself. Not only the concept of re-presentation, but also many other very stimulating theoretical proposals are developed through the case studies (“semiotic capital”, “culturalisation”, “fictivation”, “event-formula”, and also many imports from the theatre studies).

The book opens with a robust and yet stimulating theoretical introduction, which settles the main conceptual frameworks and interpretative hypothesis. The very originality is to focus on what Mouratidou calls re-presentation strategies of luxury fashion brands, and to consider them as politics: the brands not only present products that represent them in the public sphere; they also re-present this representation, so that they requalify the very semiotic units used in the representation. This metasemiotic and reflexive process is considered as a generalized apparatus (in the Foucault’s sense): it tends to occupy the whole media and public space, where it conceals the very economical, ethical and ideological nature of the market mediations.

The book is then structured in three parts, which draw a clinical path from the most exposed units of the re-presentation politics, to the deepest socio-economic machinery of the fashion industry. In each part, thorough case studies (based upon major luxury brands such as Louis Vuitton, Dior, Gucci, Balenciaga, Chanel) alternate with more methodological, interpretative or political considerations (about the ideological function of the fashion discourse in society).

The first two parts consider the “enunciative thikness” (épaisseur énonciative) of advertising campaigns that re-write other cultural forms and contents, and link them with the values of luxury fashion. Fine arts, literature, religion and politics are the topics followed and decrypted by Mouratidou in the discourse of fashion. Each topic is treated through specific and always illuminating case studies, where Mouratidou shows a great talent for the meticulous description of her materials, and demonstrates that a “sémio” approach requires mainly a postural work: paying attention to the details, considering every angle of a given phenomenon, immersing oneself into the semiotic experience of this phenomenon, and building, from within, the critical distance. For example, the collaboration between Louis Vuitton and contemporary art big star Jeff Koons is analysed through its verbal and iconic dimensions, but also through the specific event of the opening session in the Louvre museum, through its media coverage in the social networks, and through the very material dimensions of the object sac-à-main.
The hybridisations with fine arts and high culture mainly help the fashion brands to requalify themselves as artistic instances; in doing so, they cover up the commercial nature of their relations with the clients, with more legitimate values and roles: the clients become a distinctive audience, who is invited to contemplate Beauty itself. The religious intertext, on its side, puts the commercial instances into the scenography of worship, and connects them with the sacred values of the Biblical narrative (Grace, Salvation, Adoration, Holy Relic). In this chapter, Mouratidou analyses in particular the Kering group headquarters at the “Hospice des Incurables”, and details the semiotic construction of both the Inaccessible and the access to the Inaccessible.

The political intertext plays an even more pervert function in the fashion discourse, as it recycles, from within the capitalist system, the very formulas and protest forms initially shaped against capitalism. Moreover, the political quotes in fashion discourses rely on what Mouratidou calls “fictivation”, i.e. the alteration of a source-text in order to make fictional materials out of non-fictional ones. From this perspective, Mouratidou analyses the 2014 Chanel fashion show, which was based upon the semio-pragmatic codes of a street protest, and other discursive forms recycled from May-68 iconography, the Gilets-jaunes movement, or the feminist paradigm. In each case, Mouratidou shows how the fashion discourse erases the “social reference” and the original political issues of these topics, as it uses them in an iterative and confused way.

The critical perspective gets even sharper in the third and last part of the book, which now consider the socio-economic backstage aspects of the fashion industry. A brief and vivid historical review explains the development, in the 1980’s, of a new paradigm based on “management creativity”. The concepts of panoplie (Labelle), reinvestment (Maingueneau), phantasmagoria (Benjamin, Jeanneret) and forme-loisir (Mouratidou) help to understand very thoroughly both the economic and symbolic logics of this industry. These logics have one goal, says Mouratidou: to redeem all the (many) dysphoric aspects of the global industrialisation of luxury fashion. While the ecological, ethical and socio-psychological impacts of the luxury industry have never been so dramatic, the brand consortiums (LVMH, Kering) have never been so powerful, both economically and symbolically. This power relies on standardized politics of re-presentation: Mouratidou’s critical edge culminates as she demonstrates that the communication strategies of the most distinctive fashion sector are similar to prêt-à-porter.

This book is undoubtedly a must-read for everyone who is interested in both the deep structures and surface discourses of the contemporary fashion industry. Furthermore, its illuminating case studies show how a “sémio” approach really works: out of any theoretical dogma, Mouratidou follows a free path and gathers contributions from critical theory, discourse analysis, communication and mediation studies, in an appropriate and effective toolbox; her ongoing concern is to pay attention to the forms – and we must say that she really succeeds in involving the reader.