



Striving for Fashion: Historical Voices in the Chorus of Beauty

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Abstract

Historical and cultural themes as a source of inspiration in postmodernism are a structuring factor in the organization of communication between designers and consumers. The boundaries are being gradually erased not only between different forms of art, mass and elite cultures, but also between such opposite fields of human activity as fashion and religion. The article is devoted to the semantic aspects of one of the most interesting events of the recent time—the exhibition “Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination” organized by the Costume Institute of New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art in collaboration with the Vatican, which took place from May to October 2018. In this regard, the voices of authors from various fields are explored within the realm of fashion and religion, before the psychological interpretation is focused on the historical dimensions of the specific relationship of Catholicism and ceremonial costumes. Concludingly, this analysis provides evidence of the century long tradition of Catholic play with ornaments and fashion as a mimetic means for socially distancing the divine from the profane.

Keywords Fashion · Religion · Semantics · Mimesis · Ornaments

Introduction

Fashion is always responsive to the profound psychological needs of society. This perfectly reflects the inner world of the individual and puts forward new demands for collective progress. For thousands of years, the history of costume and sacred art has been interwoven in a variety of ways. We may recall classic examples of borrowing clothes shapes and headgear from architecture in the Gothic period or dressing Bible characters in the fashion trends of the

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elite of those times in Renaissance or Baroque paintings on religious themes. The influence vector worked also in the opposite direction, as, for instance, the use of techniques and motifs for decoration of fabrics, headgear, jewelry and clothes in the creation process of liturgical costumes and items for religious rituals. The borrowing of various symbolic images, silhouettes, and color composition of the visual culture of the Roman Catholic Church was particularly actual at the turn of the twentieth to the twenty-first century. Today, the semantic sphere and the symbolism of Catholicism in clothes design are important not only in terms of forecasting future fashion trends, but also as a field for new research in the humanities (Tateo & Marsico, 2018).

Religious Voices in Fashion

The analysis of the peculiarities of the interinfluence of fashion and religion is the subject of the scientific interest of art historians, culture experts, anthropologists and philosophers. The semantics of clothes was studied by Bart (2003), Brannon (2010), Stone (2004); native scholars Stankevich (2007) and Lehenkyi (2004). Communicative functions of fashion are viewed by Geczy and Karaminas (2013), Shandrenko (2012). The influence of various cultural layers on the fashion phenomena of postmodernism is studied by Lehenkyi (2004), Lahoda (2007), Kisil (2010), Pleshkova (2010), Yeremenko (2016). On the practical side, these problems are creatively comprehended in the field of art, architecture and design, and in the postmodern world, this “comprehension” is often ironic, grotesque and even provocative. Considering one of the categories of postmodernism — “aesthetic mutations,” Nasedkina (2010) defines a new imagery:

This trend has also appeared in the field of clothes design: in a variety of chaotic and dynamic shapes, or intentionally contrasted lines and colors; nonsense or ugliness; a combination of absolutely unusual or absolutely impossible, in particular, extravagant combinations of figures and elements; hypertrophy and grotesque shapes, disproportion, caricature. The value of the shape is now determined not by regulation and organization, but by the imagery enriching the person emotionally, by the individuality and the new expressiveness (Nasedkina, 2010, p. 86).

Ribeiro (2003) researches the history of relations between moral standards, religion and fashion. Chronology of religious interpretations in the works of designers of the twentieth–twenty-first centuries is analyzed by Diadkina (2017), who introduced to the scientific discourse a fragment of the reel of film of Federico Fellini. The appearance of the article is related to the theme of the forthcoming exhibition “Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination”. The event resonated in the media, including those that specialize in clothes design. Researchers and curators of the exhibition note the significant influence of Catholicism on the work of Gabrielle Chanel, Gianni Versace, Domenico Dolce, Stefano Gabbana, Pierpaolo Piccola for Valentino, Cristóbal Balenciaga and especially Alexander McQueen (Diadkina, 2017; Bolton et al., 2018; selected works are presented in the Figs. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10). However, in our view, many aspects of the interaction of fashion and religion, in particular Catholicism, remain unexplored, including the semantic and symbolic component of the process. Roman Catholic traditional symbols, static in the iconography for many centuries, are updated in the modern art of clothes designers, often changing its own semantic content. The exhibition “Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination” and Met Gala articulate the semantic function of clothes and its components (fabrics, colors, decoration, silhouettes, etc.) by means of postmodernism: citation, provocation, oxymorons, deconstruction and irony. Relying on the conclusions of R. Bart, who defines the essence of fashion “as a corpus of meanings: Fashion continuously defines and redefines clothes and the world, attributing them new relationships”



Fig. 1 Robe by John Galliano for House of Dior 2001–2002 (left), source: www.beccachic.com; singer Rihanna in a pope-inspired look (left), source: www.popsugar.co.uk



Fig. 2 Alexander McQueen for Givenchy (left), source: www.justjared.com; singer Katy Perry wearing an angel dress by Versace (right), source: www.hips.hearstapps.com



Fig. 3 Left: Yves Saint Laurent vestment for the Virgin of El Rocío, (1985), “Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination” by Vincent Tullo for The New York Times; right: Balenciaga’s, (1967) ivory and silk wedding dress, draped with only two seams at the shoulder and back. From the Holy Sacraments section in the Romanesque Fuentidueña Chapel (Susan Bednarczyk)

(Bart, 2003, p. 315), it can be stated that through the means of “applied” formation with the efforts of designers and curators complex socio-cultural changes of the present day are analyzed and predicted.



Fig. 4 Crafted by Pierpaolo Piccioli of Valentino, this red silk taffeta dress imitates the red vestments of Roman Catholic cardinals. (© Agathon Strom/The New York Times)



Fig. 5 Crystal beaded embroidery on a dress by Gianni Versace (left) imitates a Byzantine processional cross, while an evening dress by designers Maria Grazia Chiuri and Pierpaolo Piccioli from Valentino fashion house (right) recreates a fifteenth century painting on the classic biblical theme of the Garden of Eden. (Digital composite scan © Katerina Jebb/The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Methodology

The aim of this paper is identifying the main trends in the functioning of the Christian semantics of the visual symbolism of Catholicism in the modern clothes design and attempt explaining their use. In order to achieve the goal, a symbolic field is viewed in which the Roman Catholic traditions resonate with fashionable innovations combined with one of the most important in the fashion world cultural and artistic events of 2018. The main focus is on the demonstration of semantic dilemmas within the designer's imagery. The methodology of the research is based on the concept of *qualitative picture interpretation* within the framework of the so-called *Documentary method*. The Documentary method represents a reconstructive approach originally conceived by Mannheim (1982) and used for the interpretation of texts, interviews and group discussions. Bohnsack (2010) expanded this research paradigm for the systematic semantic analysis of visual case material (e.g. pictures, photographs, etc.) by integrating the perspectives of art historians Panofsky (1991) and Imdahl (1994). Hampl (2017) furthermore reframed the theoretical concept of Bauhaus painter Itten (1974) for deepening the analytic understanding of visual artifacts and performances.



Fig. 6 Luxurious wedding ensemble by Christian Lacroix reflects religious art depicting Mary, Queen of Heaven. (© Kena Betancur/AFP/Getty Images)

Catholicism and Fashion

The Roman Catholic Church is one of the oldest and conflicting religious institutions in the world. It has had a most decisive influence regarding the rise as well as the destruction of civilizations around the globe. This paper focusses on the aesthetic contributions of Catholicism to fashion. However, the cultural achievements of the church also came at a cost. As stated by Federici (2004), they were realized by the capitalist exploitation and ethnic annihilation of other religions as well as patriarchic violence and prosecution of women. While superficially appearing as often anachronistic and rigid, Catholic ideology concurrently has also proven throughout the centuries to be rather adaptable and open to change. This was for instance the case in the decisions of the Second Vatican Council, that proposed major revisions of many iron rules within the Catholic church and sought a connection to science and technology (Kozhamthadam, 2007). Art, being for centuries in close relations with both of these spheres—religion and science, in its predominant part was inspired by spiritual doctrines and funded by the Christian church.

In our view, Catholic discourse appears to be characterized by a special pomp and solemnity, which resulted in the prosperity of the European sacred art. In terms of the interinfluence of fashion and religion, Catholicism develops to the highest levels in exactly those countries, whose population not only practiced the Roman Catholic rituals, but was also technologically and aesthetically advancing in the production of clothes (e.g. Italy and France). According to Kent (2003, p. 13) France was “the center of fashion ... in the 1500 s”. The royal court developed the aesthetic styles that later trickled down to the lower levels of society. In the 1860s, the Briton Charles Frederick Worth challenged this hierarchical system. Historically he can be viewed as the first independent fashion designer, as he no longer sewed dresses to order, but “created his



Fig. 7 Evening dresses by Viktor & Rolf designers Viktor Horsting and Rolf Snoeren (left) are reminiscent of medieval statues of the Virgin Mary. On the right, the dress by Domenico Dolce and Stefano Gabbana, founders of Dolce & Gabbana, resembles a Byzantine mosaic from the Ravenna Cathedral in Italy. (Digital composite scan © Katerina Jebb/The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

own designs and presented them to the Parisian ladies” (Kent, 2003, p. 13). In the following industrial revolution and mass production expanded the distance between Haute Couture and “low-end ready-to wear” (Kent, 2003, p. 19). Following Federici’s (2004) critical viewpoint towards capitalism, it can be argued that Catholicism and fashion build on the same asymmetry of production factors: (1) Capital (in a symbolic *and* a material sense) accumulated by a small number of people and (2) labor exploited from the underprivileged masses. The reproductive forces of capital produce a vicious circle of aesthetic social distinction: the workers produce low-quality-fashion which they are doomed to wear due to a lack of time and resources, while their employers are able to indulge in culture, education and haute couture.

Centrality of the Body–The Semantics of Clothes and Costumes

Besides the function of covering the body, clothes have always had a socio-cultural significance (in regard to fulfilling certain roles); clothing occupies a niche of the representative of the soul in a materialized form, it is a sublimation of human beings and their experiences. In this border zone, the relationships between the parts of the system separated by it, are united (Marsico et al., 2013; Nedergaard, 2016). Any clothes human beings have



Fig. 8 Clothing reminiscent of the robes of nuns, monastic orders and the seven ordinances of the Catholic Church. (© Kena Betancur/AFP/Getty Images)

invented have such border functions—uniting the self and the other, while separating it: Clothing can therefore be understood as an articulation (articulator) of human condition and behavior, as an instrument of communicating with society, as a translator of feelings in a nonverbal system of signs, as a mediator between the spiritual and the material world. Every religion has developed its own fashion, i.e. its own unique set of clothes to control the distribution of symbolic capital among its members. During the last centuries, Catholicism has been particularly successful in spreading religious norms in the shape of fashion standards in Europe and the “New World”. As Tarlo (2010) points out, today these invisible norms become evident, as they are challenged by Muslim women who are progressively introducing Islamic clothing standards into contemporary urban sociotopes.

Semantics of visual markers of Catholicism (well-known symbols, ornamental motifs, colors) have, despite the canonicity, a long tradition of research and evolutionary changes that continue to this day. Among the most common artifacts (Ferguson, 1989) are various shapes of crosses, chrismos, halos, prayer ropes, ships, keys, hearts, crowns, crown of thorns, nails, lilies, roses, grapevines and others. An important symbolic content in the Catholic cult is attributed to the colors of gold and silver, as well as white, black, purple, red, violet, blue and green. Hence, religious clothes do not only serve to distinguish one religious community from another, but also distinguish members within a particular community from one another. Within the Roman Catholic Church there is a strong sense of hierarchy expressed by color: black for priests, violet for bishops, red for cardinals and white for the pope. According to Bolton et al. (2018, p. 18), colors are used both in everyday clothes and in the formal or official costume of the secular clergy. “The Catholics world chromatic scale is quite narrow, however” (Bolton et al., 2018, p. 18): Gold in Christianity symbolizes the Divine Light, therefore it was used not only as a decoration in liturgical



Fig. 9 Dior's John Galliano evening ensemble (left) is inspired by papal vestments. The equally regal vestment of the statue (right) of the Virgin of El Rocio in the Church of Notre Dame de Compassion was created by French designer Yves Saint Laurent. (Digital composite scan © Katerina Jebb/The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

dress, but also as a color of halos and gilded details of statues, as a background for icons and mosaic images of saints in the cathedrals. Silver color has a quite similar semantic meaning, which is associated with silver revetments and sacred vessels. The visual arsenal of Catholic symbols, enormous in scope and inexhaustible in semantic content, forms an important cultural layer, open to interpretations.

Met Fashion Gala in Context: From Church to Museum to Catwalk

The Museum of Costume Art, founded by Aline Bernstein and Irene Lewisohn in (1937), became a part of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and was named the Institute of Costume. Today, its collection has over 35,000 costumes and accessories. Since January 14, 2014, the costume center has been named after Anna Wintour. On May 7, 2018, an annual ball of the Institute of Costume, Met Gala, was held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The main theme of the event was “Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination”. The initiators set the goal to follow up the evolution of designers’ borrowing processes of religious imagery in a rather large chronological timespan – from the 30’s of the twentieth century to this day in its specific and visual reading. An extensive background for discussion was a large exhibition featuring 40 exhibits from the Sistine Chapel Sacristy of the Vatican that were first shown to the public, and more than 50 examples of historical clothes of the Catholic elite in



Fig. 10 A Mugler gold silk lame dress from fall 1984. Thierry Mugler’s “L’Hiver des Anges” collection drew inspiration from angels, saints, and the Virgin. (Donald Stahl, WWD)

comparison to 150 designers’ models executed over the past eight decades. Both events have caused a lot of discussions in the media among supporters and opponents of the use of religion to support the design of clothes, despite the negotiations and blessings provided by the Vatican. Archbishop Timothy Dolan, who attended the Met Gala (2018) opening ceremony, said in a *Vogue* interview:

It’s because the church and the catholic imagination, the theme of this exhibit, are all about three things: truth, goodness, and beauty. That’s why we have great schools and universities, to teach the truth; that’s why we love and serve the poor, to do good; and that’s why we’re into things such as art, poetry, music, literature, and yes, even fashion—to thank God for the gift of beauty (Codinha, 2018).

In addition to cult clothes, treasures were exhibited as well: carved wooden panels, manuscripts, silver and gold reliquaries, liturgical and ceremonial vessels, that is, material manifestations of faith that later were redefined by designers. Objects testify the artistic skills of medieval artists, and comparisons demonstrate the timeless ability of these works to attract and inspire designers (Bolton et al., 2018).

The curator of the exhibition, Andrew Bolton, also took care of previous exhibitions: *China Through the Looking Glass* (Bolton et al., 2015), *Manus x Machina* (Bolton & Cope, 2016) and *Comme des Garçons* (Bolton & Kawakubo, 2017). “Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination” is the final chord of a series of events aimed at revealing the nature of aesthetics and creativity. Andrew Bolton believes that although the

exhibition is associated with Catholic images, it is related to creativity itself and everything that stimulates creativity.

Among the creative approaches of the twentieth–twenty-first centuries presented during the exhibition, two opposite directions that work with the symbolism of Catholic ritualism are worth highlighting. The first is aimed at the interpretation of the splendor of the liturgical dresses of priests and hierarchs (“Pope’s” costumes in John Galiano’s collections for Christian Dior 2000–2001 and “Byzantine” images of Dolce & Gabbana Fall/Winter 2013–2014). The second one experiments with the asceticism of monks’ dresses (Valentino collection, 2016).

If we dress in reference to religious themes, we use certain codes and symbols, quickly understood by a large number of people and strong in their historical significance. E.g. the symbol of “the cross ... extends the allusion to crusading knights who believed that that symbol made them invincible against their Muslim opponents” (Bolton et al., 2018, p. 294). But simultaneously the initial character of costumes as signifiers of certain religious affiliations, of specific ethnic or socio-economic origins, or caste is challenged. If clothing is not used as a uniform anymore, it becomes the subject of irritation and interpretation. Just like underwear has the paradoxical effect of hiding the body that it is actually revealing (Valsiner, 2019), religiously styled costumes enrich a person’s appearance with spiritual symbolism, while simultaneously hiding that person’s true religiousness. There is a contextualization of religious symbols, which is referring to the clothes, to the chosen style of clothing, to the situation and to the person itself. The ballroom dresses of the Met Gala (Vogue, 2018) impress due to the charismatic talent of the most famous fashion designers, their outstanding fashion design, the diversity of ideas, the embodiment and the richness of the images of religious elements and elements of various subcultures. For example, the incendiary dark-skinned pan-sexual singer feminist Janelle Monáe wears an achromatic dress by Marc Jacobs. The ambitious model and actress Lily Collins—a delicate but bitchy character—wears a chaste suit by Givenchy. The cheerful blonde Greta Gerwig wears a long black outfit by The Row. All of the women resemble the image of restrained nuns. However, they are not at all restrained, but go beyond of what used to be considered a clearly delineated border of the religious realm. Symbols of black and are highlighted by sharp lines of silhouettes. Presented at the ball dresses of Anna Hathway by Valentino Couture and Naomi Watts by Michael Kors, vice versa, are associated with the solemn dress of the Pope because of their color, cut, excessive decoration and expensive texture of fabrics.

Haute Couture Meets Catholicism

The inspiration process in created sets is often mediated through the phenomenon of young subcultures such as “goths” or “emo”, the visual imagery of which relies on a substantive embodiment of the Christian tradition. A striking example is the Lily Collins’ costume at the ball. First of all, a make-up borrowed from the “goths” stylistics and a metallic head-gear, hinting at the diadem of the American statue of Liberty, in combination with a necked dress, details and colors of which resemble attire of the Catholic monks. The emotional sound of the image through the contrast of the stated meanings is “overflowing” with the internal energy, and therefore the photo of Lily Collins has become a visual hallmark of the event, along with a photo of Rihanna’s “Pope” costume, which repeats the image of Christian Dior’s collection of 2001–2002 (Fig. 1).

Dressed in black vinyl stockings and the same mini-dress by Iris Van Herpen, associated with the iconography of the devil's medieval images, Solange Knowles in her own image exploits the style of punks in contrast with the gilded diadem that is shaped like a halo in the Roman Catholic statues of the Holy Mother. Infernal themes were extended by Kate Moss, dressed in the minimalist black dress with "wings" made of the ostrich's feathers by Saint Laurent, and Nicki Minaj in a hypertrophied bright red dress from the Oscar de la Renta collection, who with her image alludes to the hellfire. Christian symbols, profaned with subcultural environments, are devalued not only to a distinctly decorative motive—they receive the features of props, become a regular accessory, a brutal accent, or an exquisite detail of theatrical performance.

Another source of inspiration for the exhibited costumes, including the genital-baring shorts of Rick Owens from the 2015 men's collection, is "The Canterbury Tales" by Geoffrey Chaucer, a work well-known, besides fruity stories in the style of Boccaccio's novels, for satirical allusion to the Catholic Church. This context in the style of oxymoron gives to the overall exhibition's concept a special shade of irony and grotesque. Thus, one can agree with Kisil (2010), who argues that "the traditional methods of work of the designers of the first half and the middle of the twentieth century have changed into experimental-shocking approaches of designers of the postmodern age" (Kisil, 2010, p. 19).

The multilayered cultural coding proposed by the designers of the third millennium complicates and overdramatizes the conceptual domain of events that combine the exhibition and the ball, gives this domain a particular internal tension. Historical and cultural interpretations of the artistic language of costumes of different ages enable us to speak about binary oppositions, which may be seen in a visual contrast and through internal drama resonate at the deep levels of the subconscious. For example, the "sacred—profane" dilemma offers image of an angel, presented at the Met Gala by American singer and actress Katy Perry with kitsch signs of nonsense. Profane (from Latin "profanus": deprived of holiness, uninitiated), which in art criticism is interpreted as an amateurish, naturalistic (Vlasov, 2007, p. 836) is embodied in the carnival imagery of Katy Perry's "armor", which is associated with even the aesthetics of the variety shows: golden leather boots on high heels and a translucent mini dress with a bright golden gloss are complemented with the giant (more than two meter high) wings with the props features. An inspiration for the creation of this image could be the exhibited gray "winged" trouser suit from the collection of the designer Alexander McQueen, the upper part of which is made of perforated thin strips of wood. The elegant and provocative nature of the work by Alexander McQueen compared to the cheerful dress of Katy Perry by Atelier Versace looks almost like a symbol of puritanism and modesty (Fig. 2).

The "winged" costumes appeared at the fashion shows back in the mid-1980s, as we may see with the minimalist dress of the "bronze" props wings by Thierry Mugler of the autumn/winter season 1984–1985. Extravagant evening dress by John Galliano for Christian Dior Haute Couture for the autumn/winter season 2005–2006, also presented at the exhibition, exploits the image of an angel in an ironic way—veiling transparent wings with a primitive shape, like the rest of the dress, decorated with naive rustic embroidery with heart motifs. The image of the suit is completed with a strange jewelry in the shape of a halo with a crown and radial rays, decorated with stars, on the head of a mannequin. Since angels act as guides, guardians and God's agents, they are especially important for the imagination of fashion designers (Bolton et al., 2018). The visual meme of the "angel's wings" as one of the most recognizable symbols of the purity in Catholicism not only loses its sacred symbolism, as in the works of Thierry Mugler or John Galliano for Christian Dior Haute Couture, but also acquires the features of sacrilege in the image by Atelier Versace.

The costume of Sarah Jessica Parker at Met Gala was quite provocative and even a bit comic: a luxurious floor-skimming dress by Dolce & Gabbana, overwhelmed with decor (golden applications with accented images of red hearts), was accompanied by a complicated headdress in the shape of an extensive baroque canopy with a statue of Holy Mother inside. The main role that the actress played in the TV series “Sex and the City” and that is subconsciously associated directly with Sarah Jessica Parker, gives the image presented at Met Gala a special emotional tension. In this costume, the high symbolism of the image of the Blessed Virgin Mary is profaned with a carnival aesthetic code of the dress and the frivolity of the character emphasized with a make-up, thus alluding to the almost sacrilegious oxymoron. The semantic field of the main symbols of the Roman Catholic ritual in such a theatrical interaction is updated, changing some of its characteristics.

The beige dress embroidered with gold with a long cape, presented at Met Gala by the actress Rosie Huntington-Whiteley, was made by Ralph Lauren. The exquisite image is complemented with a golden halo, which in a particularly ironic way emphasizes the deep (to the belt) décolleté of the dress. The profanation of Catholic Christian symbols was continued by the maxi dress of Stella Maxwell by Moschino, decorated with a vivid print of collages of Catholic icons’ fragments. As a mother of Jesus Christ, the Blessed Virgin Mary has always been the central figure in Christian religious faith and practice. It is not for the first time, when elements of the images of saints in the work of designers’ act as decor, as one may notice within the presentation of five dresses from the autumn–winter 2013–2014 collection of Dolce & Gabbana with the details of the mosaic of the Cathedral of Montreal in Sicily or the set of “Lumiere” by Jean-Paul Gaultier (2007) (Bolton et al., 2018). The sacred images decorate the central or upper part of the attire, in case of the costume of Jean-Paul Gaultier the role of the Blessed Virgin Mary had to be performed by the model not only through the styled halo, but also through a print on the fabric, thanks to which her silhouette looks like an element of the stained glass. Printed images of the Virgin Mary and the baby Jesus are found on the attire of the Moschino model. Because of the length of her skirt, however, the images appeared on the bottom, demonstrating the desacralization of the most important biblical personalities. But neither the media nor the Vatican objected. The aesthetics of fashion apparently calm the spirits.

Conclusion

Exposition through games with symbols keeps the phenomenon of fashion discourse up to date and experimentally shows that the notion of the sacred is constantly being under historical development. The exhibition “Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination” can be considered as a performance, that is actively used as a representative tool of the modern fashion industry. It acts as a constructor of the concept and artistic image of clothes collections for catwalks (Bilyakovych, 2013, p. 34). Within this bright theatrical performance, one managed to combine things that are usually not connectable in the real life, achieving the integrity of the shape and thus expressing ideas that exist only in the mental reality. The further the components connected by artists—in our case by designers and curators—are found in real life, the brighter are the semantics and the symbolism of fashion as artistic creativity. The tendencies shown in this way demonstrate changes in the understanding of the very phenomenon of fashion as a way of learning socio-cultural features with the priority of humanitarian methodologies of mastering components of communication, such as symbols and semantics.

The costume is always characterized by a certain ritual. With its imagery characteristics, it establishes or violates certain standards defined by society. Demonstration of these standards ensures recognition of their bearers, not limited to socio-cultural roles, revealing identity, ideological and psychological peculiarities. The concept of the exhibition “Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination” (Bolton et al., 2018) thus develops the semantic paradigm proposed by Bart (2003) in which the fashion appears as a semiotic object, and the costume history is viewed as a history of changes in human values and therefore includes predictive elements. The aesthetic function of clothes in this case acts as a harmonizing and unifying factor, as Andrew Bolton says about the ultimate goal of the event: “I think that the exhibition is a beauty that can fill in the gap between believers and non-believers. And this is really one of her main messages” (Bauck, 2018).

Discussion: Mimesis by Fashion and the Veils of Catholic Power

Taking a step back for conclusion, how can we critically understand the transfer of religious dresses and symbolism into the public sphere of the profane? What are the political effects of the exhibition in terms of shifts in social power? From a theoretical viewpoint the exhibited dresses of “Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination” can be understood as acts of mimesis—aesthetically this is evident in the mimicry of religious imagery and symbolism within the field of fashion. This process can be despised as utter “imitation”, particularly when regarding the economic telos of the fashion industry, that is geared to producing profits from creating large numbers of copies. In art, however, the concept of mimesis rather refers to the ideas of “realistic interpretation” or “representation”. Wulf (2013) even takes the argument one step further: According to him, mimesis is not just an aesthetic, but essentially an anthropological category! It refers to the creative capacity of human beings to innovate (Wulf, 2013, p. 247). Historically the Greek word originated from the context of theater and bodily performance. Hence, already draping one’s body in cloth per se can be regarded as an act of mimesis and creative innovation. Traversa (2012) elaborates this idea by analyzing the personal narratives of Catholic and Muslim women. For the female participants of Traversa’s study religion is not primarily restrictive, but a means of bodily identifying as women and creating a sense of gender-belonging within society.

The Catholic church has traditionally strictly controlled the use of ecclesial dresses. According to Hume (2013), especially during the nineteenth century—“the Uniform Century”—the Vatican had stipulated a rigorous dress code for the clergy and laypersons which resulted in a “standardization of dress” (Hume, 2013) that included regulations on the body itself (like the shape and frequency of haircuts). The Second Vatican Council of 1962 generally promised a wave of democratization and freedom. But it was also a dramatic physical intervention on the clergy, whose bodies had adapted to the Catholic dress corset for ages—e.g. the removal of the headdresses displayed churchpersons’ often thin and patchy hair, the introduction of more form-fitting modern clothes made them suddenly appear overweight (McLay, 1996). After interviewing Australian nuns, Hume (2013) describes the paradoxical effect that loosening dress restrictions had on the female body. It created emotional strain and questioned women’s identities:

Women who had never worn make-up or jewellery began to look around for advice on these aspects of their persona. For some, it was a liberating experience; for others,

it was confusing and troublesome. Elderly nuns especially suffered from these new introductions to clothing; some did not want to discard the habit as it was the ultimate symbol of their lives. For these women, it was an emotionally draining process. The changes were very painful, not only for the nuns themselves but also for laywomen who were used to seeing the nuns as some sort of icon, an extension of their own identity as Catholic women, a revered extension that set women religious apart from themselves. (Hume, 2013).

The historical perspective exposes the preconditions of the exhibition “Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination”—it was not just the result of inspirational fashion designers, but as stated by Hume (2013) also largely enabled by decades of “painful” habitual readjustments within the Catholic church itself. Suddenly clergy and laypeople had to pay attention to their physical looks—keep their bodies in shape and make them aesthetically appealing, due to evolving Catholic fashion standards.

What can we learn about the framework of ecclesial power and the state of our society by e.g. looking at singer Rihanna wearing a pope’s uniform? The media praised this event as an example of democratization and equalization. At a closer look, however, this first impression appears questionable. “Tickets to the coveted event cost \$30,000” (Petter, 2018). Hence, the general public was excluded by an almost impenetrable paywall. The exclusivity and richness of the presented dresses represent a vigorous contrast to traditional Christian standards that promoted modesty: “In the early years before Christianity became a full-fledged religion, it was expected that followers of Christ would wear clothing for decency and warmth rather than for show” (Hume, 2013). At the beginning of the tenth century, this general idea was altered for the male members of the clergy. At the center of this new movement was the French cloister Cluny that was under direct rule of the pope. Cluny was founded in 910 by Duke William of Aquitaine as being detached from outside influences with the purpose for helping the poor (Mullins, 2006). However, its factual independence and strict organization attracted aristocrats and noblemen. Thus, the French cloister became the breeding ground of Catholic splendor beyond imagination—its monks’ exclusive garments are at display in the Musée de Cluny, Paris. Thus, while the act of placing the Met Fashion Gala “Heavenly Bodies” in a cloister context may appear bold and innovative today, it does so with the backdrop of eleven centuries of Catholic attraction to the profane thrills of rich decoration and ornaments. Valsiner (2008, p. 70) regards “ornaments as cultural arenas of meaning construction”. Since the tenth century, Catholicism has always been attracted to fashion, because fashion—by its physical and material means—was capable of creating divine exclusivity for the clergy. The greatest profane ornament, however, is the Gala’s venue itself—“The Cloisters” are no religious environment at all, but a museum that was eclectically constructed in the twentieth century. Just like various fashion designers presented their interpretation of Catholic garments at the Gala, “The Cloisters” was assembled by combining European cloister parts from various origins and eras (Barnet & Wu, 2005). Hence the very place, where the Met Gala “Heavenly Bodies” took place, can be regarded as a fashionable interpretation of Catholicism.

If, however, eleven centuries have not led to a democratization and equalization of wealth within the Catholic church, nonetheless they may have contributed to a democratization and equalization of gender—thus to an act of feminism. Female singers like Rihanna, Madonna or Katy Perry were among the stars of the show. Therefore, the Met Gala may indeed represent a favorable development for women. As mentioned earlier, within the Catholic church the conceptualized inferiority of women to men was traditionally expressed by their dress code (Hume, 2013). While men, for instance, were entitled

to wear colorful garments for liturgy, women were only allowed to wear black—the color of lowest symbolic value. In this regard the fact that Rihanna wore the white robe of the pope at the Gala may superficially appear like a powerful act of feministic mimesis, as her assault on patriarchal hierarchy would not have been tolerated by the clergy centuries or even decades ago. But evidently outside of the show, the Catholic church is still operating by misogynous standards. According to McElwee (2015), Pope Francis “strongly criticizes gender theory, comparing it to nuclear arms”. Kubacki (2018) revealed the scandal of the systematic sexual abuse of nuns and secret abortions paid by the clergy perpetrators. The article was published in *Donne Chiesa Mondo* (Women Church World), the women’s magazine of the Vatican. Its editor, Lucetta Scaraffia (Barber, 2018) and eleven other female staff members had to resign due to the pressure of the Catholic church (BBC, 2019). Thus, while the Met Fashion Gala (2018) may have appeared like a positive symbolic revolution, the real impact of change is ridiculed by factual Vatican politics.

Apart from that, the Met Gala (2018) “Heavenly bodies” also needs to be criticized for being socially excluding: The creative encounter of Catholic faith and fashion was essentially limited to the upper class. The general public were not allowed to physically and bodily participate but were merely tolerated to attend and cheer via the narrow channels of mass media. In this respect the notion of “heavenly exclusivity” is in line with the materialistic road Catholicism took since the tenth century cloister Cluny: Catholicism has invested itself in ornaments for creating divine exclusivity of the few, that were gifted by earthly riches. The New York Cloisters Museum, which served as the main stage and spiritual backdrop of the event, feels by itself like an uncanny place: The Cloisters’ building blocks are real, while the architecture is perfect mimicry—an extravagant expression of twentieth century fashion. For the flamboyant congregation of celebrities at the Met Gala (2018), however, the venue perfectly fitted the purpose: detached from the natural world of the ordinary, they could indulge in the heavenly beauty of garments and ornamented fabrics—just like the monks of cloister Cluny eleven centuries ago.

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