

Celebrity sells

‘Our customers appreciate the association with stardom.’

In 1975, Giorgio Armani sold his Volkswagen. The money went into a pool of US\$10,000 that Armani and his partner Sergio Galeotti had got together to open their Milanese fashion house. Having left medical school to enter the fashion business in 1957, Armani had worked as a buyer for the department store La Rinascente. But it was as a designer at Cerruti, which he joined in the early 1960s, that he learned the techniques that were to make his career. The charismatic Nino Cerruti was a master of marketing: he once convinced Lancia to paint a fleet of cars in the same shade as his new range of suits, and then enlisted the curvaceous actress Anita Ekberg to break a bottle of champagne over one of them for the cameras. The effectiveness of such publicity coups was not lost on Armani, who would use relationships with celebrities as the cornerstone of his marketing strategy.

Armani’s clothes alone were impressive enough – although the casual deconstructed look of his suits is familiar today, it was revolutionary at the time – but it took a movie star to transfer the designs from the fashion press to the public eye. The star was Richard Gere, and the vehicle was a film called *American Gigolo* (1980). Designers had been dressing stars for years – Hubert de Givenchy was famous for outfitting Audrey

Hepburn – but this was arguably the first time a set of clothes had played such a prominent role in a film, almost becoming an extension of the main character. After Gere wore his suits on screen, Armani's sales soared. Since then, by nurturing a close working relationship with Hollywood, Armani has provided the wardrobe for more than 300 movies, always ensuring that his name appears in the credits. His marketing department has also seen to it that movie stars are regularly invited to his shows and outfitted in Armani for high-profile events – especially the Oscars. For a long stretch of the 1990s, Oscar night was Armani night.

According to Armani's communications chief, Robert Triefus, 'Certainly, Armani can be considered as having pioneered the link between fashion and Hollywood. His dressing of *American Gigolo* was a milestone that led to an enduring relationship. It's part of the brand value – our customers appreciate the association with stardom.'

Armani is not alone in developing such relationships. Designers such as Valentino and Versace have also displayed a knack for deploying star firepower. At Louis Vuitton, the brand's artistic director, Marc Jacobs, has moved on from using supermodels to pop stars and actresses in its advertising. In the UK, as we've heard, Matthew Williamson makes no secret of the fact that dressing a string of well-known young women has enhanced his profile. Male fashion is not immune, either (see Chapter 15: Targeted male). During the run-up to Oscar night, designer brands begin a mating dance with stars and their publicists, often sending racks of free clothing in the hope that a garment will make it on to the red carpet.

The benefits are as blinding as a spotlight: stars give brands a well-defined personality for a minimum of effort, and bring with them a rich fantasy world to which consumers aspire. In addition, consumers have a 'history' with stars. Even though they've only seen them on the screen or in the pages of magazines, they form an attachment to celebrities, regarding them as friendly faces and reliable arbiters of taste. Models, with their distant gazes and alien bodies, can't compete.

April Glassborow, senior buyer for international designer collections at Harvey Nichols, recalls, 'When Victoria Beckham was photographed in a green satin Chloé dress by the *Sunday Times Style* section, it created a demand. It's not a theory. When a celebrity wears something, it has a direct impact on sales.'

By now, there must be few readers of glossy magazines who still believe that, when an actress is photographed carrying the latest ‘must-have’ bag, she has actually paid for the item. Celebrities occasionally go shopping like everyone else, but generally they are bombarded with free gifts and offers of sponsorship deals. Designers will practically slit one another’s throats to get a dress photographed on a star during Oscar night or at the Cannes Film Festival. ‘When Nicole Kidman wore Pucci in Cannes, it was huge,’ confirms Joseph Velosa, managing director of Matthew Williamson. Almost as huge, in fact, as the actress’s engagement to be the face of Chanel No. 5.

In terms of cost-effectiveness, a public appearance that might lead to a photo in a magazine is far more desirable than a multi-million-pound contract. Agencies such as Exposure in London (see Chapter 7: The image-makers) offer brands the possibility of rounding up stars for events, or placing clothes on influential figures, as part of their service. Such deals can work both ways, too: the actress Liz Hurley’s career sky-rocketed after she wore ‘that dress’ – a daring low-cut Versace number held together by safety pins – to the premiere of the film *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994).

The relationship is a delicate one, however – for both parties. The designer’s marketing adviser must ensure that the chosen celebrity flatters the brand. And the stars, aware that their every move will be made in the full glare of the media spotlight, must be absolutely sure that the garment flatters them. Just as many fashion brands hire agencies to develop relationships with celebrities, the stars themselves seek the counsel of professional stylists.

Andrea Lieberman counts among her regular clients Jennifer Lopez, Gwen Stefani, Kate Hudson, Dido, Drew Barrymore and Janet Jackson. ‘A star’s image is today their major asset,’ she told *Elle* magazine (*‘Styliste de Stars’*, 6 September 2004). ‘With the music industry in transition and piracy undermining their income, they’ve expanded into other fields like designing lines of clothing, launching their own perfumes, and tours. To be credible, they have to maintain a certain style. And they’re under a lot of pressure: the slightest fashion faux pas and they’re skewered by the media.’

At the beginning of her career, when she left Parsons School of Design in New York, Lieberman was forced to take a job as a waitress before finding a post with the designer Giorgio Sant’Angelo. Later, after being inspired by her travels in Africa, she opened a jewellery

and ethnic accessories store called Culture & Reality. Soon she found herself styling upcoming New York rock bands, and was eventually introduced to the hip-hop performer Sean ‘P. Diddy’ Combs. This led to a meeting with Jennifer Lopez. It was Lieberman who put Lopez into a much-photographed diaphanous green Versace dress, split to the navel, for the Grammy awards.

One stylist who has achieved star status is Patricia Field, who styled Sarah Jessica Parker for the fashion-fixated television series *Sex and the City*. Field is in fact a professional costume designer with several TV and film credits to her name. She opened her eponymous boutique in Greenwich Village in 1966 and started designing for television in 1980, creating the costumes for a series called *Crime Story*, about the Las Vegas Mafia. By putting *SATC*’s Carrie Bradshaw in a combination of designer labels and pretty thrift-store finds, Parker and Field created a bohemian mix-and-match look that resonated with consumers. How many pairs of Manolo Blahnik shoes were sold thanks to Carrie’s love affair with the sleek sling-backs? At the beginning of 2004, *The Telegraph* commented, ‘The fictional character. . . has had more influence on the way we dress than many designers could hope for.’ (‘What treats has Carrie got in store?’, 20 January 2004.)

Sex and the City has finished its run, but it helped to convince image-makers that the buying public related more to the perceived ‘realness’ – however illusory – of actresses than to the unattainable beauty of models. Stars began to replace models on the cover of fashion magazines. Interviewed by *Time* magazine’s *Style & Design* special edition (September 2003), Grace Coddington, the creative director of US *Vogue*, hinted that this might be a bone of contention: ‘There are no models on covers any more. They’re all actors because they’re what sells. An actor often dictates what you’re going to get. I find that annoying. And I’m incredibly shy, so they scare the pants off me. But I feel perfectly comfortable with the models. They’re like my kids.’

Designers such as Matthew Williamson, Zac Posen and Marc Jacobs have been lucky enough to attract the attention and friendship of celebrities, who wear their clothes and attend their shows as a gesture of appreciation and support. Brands that don’t have such an appeal merely dig into their wallets to ensure that the right people are seen in their front row. For upcoming and mid-range designers, however, celebrities aren’t always an option.

There are signs, in any case, that the celebrity craze might be dying out. Upmarket brands, particularly, have started wondering when glitter becomes kitsch. In the view of Lanvin designer Alber Elbaz, ‘The red carpet has gone from elitist to popular. Everyone has access to it, even if only on the internet or through magazines. Since fashion is an integral part of celebrities’ lives, it’s become a kind of permanent red carpet despite itself. But I don’t think this phenomenon of identification is going to last much longer.’

WHEN CELEBRITIES BECOME DESIGNERS

As fame fatigue sets in and consumers become increasingly sceptical about the relationships between brands and stars, it has become necessary to integrate celebrities more closely with the design process. Rather than being expected to buy an item of clothing merely because it is worn by a star, shoppers are now sold products that have – they are told – actually been created by their idol.

To a certain extent, this trend grew naturally of the stars’ penchant for creating their own lines of clothing. Another celebrity seems to join the list every day: Jennifer Lopez launched a fashion brand back in 2001; Beyoncé and Gwen Stefani launched their lines in 2004; French fashion model Milla Jovovich teamed up with designer Carmen Hawk to launch Jovovich-Hawk in 2003. British pop singer Lily Allen entered the fray more recently with Lily Loves. Sienna Miller and her sister created the line twenty8twelve. The Olsen twins have no less than two lines: an upmarket, adult brand called The Row, as well as a more affordable range called Elizabeth and James. And nobody was surprised when Victoria Beckham unveiled a denim collection called DvB.

It’s not always easy to tell whether these projects spring out of a star’s desire to further monetize their fame, or a genuine interest in fashion. Accordingly, some celebrity brands are taken more seriously by the style establishment than others. Perhaps because it is a model–designer tandem, Jovovich-Hawk has been received positively by the fashion press. In the *International Herald Tribune*, sharp-penned journalist Suzy Menkes observed: ‘[T]here is a significant difference between a fashion designer with an individual artistic handprint working with a licensee and those whose artistry, not to mention primary income, is

not in drawing and stitch craft... Jovovich-Hawk... is an exception. Although Jovovich herself moved from modelling to movies... both she and Hawk are totally involved in the design process.'

Jovovich told Menkes: 'Carmen and I both draw – we collaborate on an equal level on anything artistic.' Celebrities with a more offhand approach, merely stamping their names on clothes they've had little involvement in designing, can expect a cooler reception. In the same article, Robert Burke of Bergdorf Goodman admitted that he found some collections 'insulting'. 'It is a little arrogant to say "I am a designer". We in the business hold the true idea of fashion closer to our hearts.'

Offering a word of warning, Menkes added: 'The stars who are making it in fashion have long-term business plans and a slow building process that puts them on a par with normal fashion designers.' ('Don't give up the day job', 13 September 2005.)

Occasionally, performing artists have been welcomed by the fashion industry because their quirky sense of style makes them genuinely interesting. This seems to be the case of Gwen Stefani, whose LAMB label (it stands for Love Angel Music Baby) has fashion journalists reaching for positive statements almost despite themselves. 'Stefani has a passion for fashion that gives a freshness and sincerity to the clothes,' allowed Menkes.

The fashion world was also intrigued by a line created in 2007 by the actress Chloë Sevigny, in tandem with hip brand Opening Ceremony. This may have been because Sevigny is a fashion industry sweetheart – regularly appearing in the audience at shows and lending her quirky personal style to photo shoots. Or it could have been because she was on familiar ground: for a while she was creative director of vintage-inspired label Imitation of Christ. *New York* magazine, at least, seemed pleased with the idea, pointing out that 'every piece in the collection had to be something she personally would want to own'. The result, the magazine said, was 'cute but also very fashion-forward and perhaps a bit too challenging for the average girl'. ('Chloë Sevigny designs the clothes of her dreams', 12 September 2007.)

The partnership with Opening Ceremony highlighted another evolution in the relationship between brands and celebrities: the recruitment of stars by existing brands.

By far the most widely reported example of this at the time of writing was the partnership between Britain's Topshop and one of the country's most visible exports, Kate Moss. The selling point here was that the

collection with Moss's name on it was co-designed by the model, based on favourite items from her wardrobe. It was also extremely accessibly priced, so her young fans could dress up as their heroine for as little as £45 (around US\$87): the cost of a slinky black dress.

Importantly, for marketing-savvy consumers, the alliance felt honest. 'Moss is a long-time fan of the store and has always shopped there, mixing in cheap pieces with her ultra-fashionable wardrobe.' ('Kate Moss: Topshop's new muse', *Telegraph.co.uk*, 20 September 2006.)

The deal with Moss was said to have cost Topshop parent company Arcadia around £3 million (US\$6 million), which sounds like a bargain. Arcadia boss Philip Green told the press he expected the new label – simply called 'Kate' – to grow into a global brand. The not entirely surprising results of the partnership were straggling queues outside Topshop in Oxford Street and Barney's in New York, where the 80-piece collection also went on sale.

Commenting on the relationship in *MSN Money*, Verdict Research director Neil Saunders said: 'It is increasingly difficult to drive volume on [women's] clothing. The number of clothing items a woman buys each year has doubled over the last ten years, and that can't continue. That's why retailers can add value by model association.'

Not to be beaten, in spring 2007 Spanish brand Mango launched a collection designed by Jovovich-Hawk, whom we met earlier. But associations with top models may not be enough. How about teaming up with a global superstar?

Having already supplied an 'off-stage wardrobe' for Madonna and her stage crew during a 2006 tour, the following year H&M asked the singer to design a collection under the name M by Madonna. Consumers were informed that the star 'worked closely' with the company's head of design Margareta van den Bosch to come up with the resulting clothes. And Ms van den Bosch herself was on hand to assure us that '[Madonna] was extraordinarily style conscious, passionate and involved in even the smallest details.' ('Madonna becomes H&M's material girl', *Evening Standard*, 12 February 2007.)

Sometimes the more unexpected the partnership, the more it withstands scrutiny. *Sex and the City* star Sarah Jessica Parker added to her fashion credibility in the eyes of some when she joined forces with budget sportswear brand Steve & Barry's to launch a line called Bitten. The brand positioning (not a million miles from that of H&M) was that everybody should be able to afford fashion. The slogan for the collection

was 'Fashion is not a luxury, it's a right.' Company owners Steve Shore and Barry Prevor said Parker 'decided to align with them because of their philosophy of offering quality merchandise at the lowest possible prices'. ('Sarah Jessica Parker to star for Steve & Barry's', *Brandweek*, 19 March 2007.) In a press release, Parker said: 'Women should be able to wear great clothes and not lie in bed at night feeling guilty about how much money they've spent.'

The Bitten line consisted of around 500 items of clothing and accessories, from shirts and cashmere sweaters to jeans and footwear – none of which cost more than US\$20. The 'ethical celebrity partnership' had arrived. This may be an avenue for other stars to explore: using their fame to co-create affordable fashion for their (often) young and impressionable fans.

Aside from that, it is reasonable to assume that most celebrity-driven collections are either one-offs, or fragile structures that are unlikely to stand the test of time. Those that emerge from the spin cycle will be the most sincere and the most qualitative: in other words, striking, good-value products that are the result of a genuine collaboration between a star with a vision and a designer who knows how to interpret it.

Further down the line, with fame fatigue continuing to spread, many consumers may yearn for the return of genuine brands created by real designers. The presence of a celebrity in the strategy may one day be read as a signal that the marketing budget has taken precedence over the quality of the product.

Press to impress

‘Fashion magazines are an extension of the marketing departments of large fashion companies.’

Marching down a steel-cold street in central Stockholm with about an hour to kill before my appointment at H&M, I end up doing what I always do in these circumstances: I find a store selling magazines. But this time, rather than simply catching up on the news and topping up my pop culture references while thawing my hands and feet, I decide to write down the names of all the fashion and style magazines on the shelf. I’m looking at the list now, scrawled in my notebook. Alongside local-language magazines, and the heavyweight bibles that can be found almost everywhere – *Vogue*, *GQ*, *Elle*, *Marie-Claire* – there are lots of cultish titles that none the less strive to be ‘international’: *Zink*; *V*; *Nylon*; *Oyster*; *Pap*; *Citizen K*; *WAD*; *Plaza*; *Squint*; *Rebel*; *Black Book*; *Dazed & Confused*; *Tank*; *Flaunt*; *Surface*. There is even a magazine called *Shoo*, devoted entirely to accessories. And this is a relatively small shop in Stockholm, not a giant media emporium like Borders in Oxford Street or the magazine kiosk at Grand Central Station in New York.

Whether all these magazines will still exist by the time this book comes out is open to question. *The Face*, the style magazine of my youth, recently closed down, having failed to age gracefully with its

audience, while simultaneously losing touch with its target market of suburban hipsters. Nevertheless, my little experiment shows that despite the web – despite satellite TV, come to think of it – fashion consumers are still addicted to those glossy pages; and fashion advertisers, too.

What I'm really interested in here, of course, is the relationship between fashion magazines and advertisers. The situation warrants scrutiny. While fashion is often presented as an art form, or at least a form of entertainment, it almost entirely lacks a critical press. Movies and books are regularly disembowelled with a few strokes of the pen, but the vast percentage of fashion journalism is at best effervescent, at worst fawning. Could it possibly be because magazines need to keep their advertisers sweet? After all, following the frenzied consolidation of the last few years, which saw most of the luxury brands swallowed up by a handful of conglomerates – LVMH, Gucci Group and Richemont – fashion advertisers are wealthier and more powerful than ever.

A few days after my return from Stockholm, during fashion week in Paris, I manage to grab a few moments with Masoud Golsorkhi, the founder and editor of a magazine called *Tank*. Now that *The Face* has folded, *Tank* is possibly the best example of an edgy and intelligent style magazine.

Golsorkhi says, '*Tank* strives to provide an alternative perspective, and as such it is far more critically engaged than many of its competitors. Most fashion magazines are an extension of the marketing departments of large fashion companies. Our approach isn't about buying the complete marketing message; although we don't entirely reject it, either. We accept that fashion is not essential, but as there's clearly a sociological and psychological desire for its existence, it's a subject that merits intelligent coverage.'

So why don't other magazines have a similar outlook? Golsorkhi seems almost shocked by my naivety. 'The fashion press is very much gagged,' he says. 'This is not just about advertising cash – it's also about gifts and holidays. The connection between fashion brands and the media is based on relationships, and fashion PR people work very hard to stimulate friendships with journalists. It's very difficult to write nasty things about your friends.'

A press relations executive working for a designer label tells me a story about a training event for young PR people hosted by a leading UK fashion journalist. 'We'd all been summoned to hear this journalist

tell us how we could best convince her to write about our brands. She had a list of ten do's and don'ts. The only one I remember is this: "If you must give us free gifts, give us vouchers instead."

Golsorkhi says that *Tank's* comparatively high cover price – an issue costs £10 – is designed to guarantee its independence. 'The idea is that the magazine survives on sales rather than advertising sponsorship. Of course we carry advertising, but we maintain the right to say what we like. And the magazine's balance is far more in favour of editorial than advertising.'

Golsorkhi believes that fashion brands are over-protected by the media, which can lead to marketing errors and ruined businesses. 'The clothes go straight out there to the biggest focus group in the world – the consumers, who have a nasty habit of rejecting a brand whose designs they don't like, even if it has spent a fortune on advertising and thus been given the stamp of approval by the fashion press. A more critical press would ultimately benefit the industry.'

He points to Versace, a brand that is increasingly described as 'troubled' by the business press, while continuing to spend a fortune on advertising in the glossies. (A recent spate of ads featured Madonna dressed as a sexy secretary.)

But perhaps it's wrong to try and separate fashion magazines from the industry they cover. Fashion is not politics, after all. It's a relatively small and self-contained community in which stylists, art directors, photographers and editors flit from magazines to advertising campaigns and back again. (This explains the common complaint that it's often difficult to tell a fashion spread from an advertisement: the same team may have created both.) Fashion editors and stylists also offer their services directly to designers at the start of the creative process, which handily enables everyone to come to an agreement on prevailing trends.

Nicholas Coleridge, managing director of Condé Nast in the UK – home to *Vogue*, *Glamour*, *Tatler*, *Vanity Fair* and *GQ*, among others – says, '*Vogue* and other fashion magazines don't exist to be overly critical; although they can criticize by exclusion. Our job is to cover trends. The editors themselves choose the clothes they want to present on the editorial pages, and the stylists have considerable room for manoeuvre. There is no pre-arranged deal in terms of editorial space in return for advertising support. The editors are as keen to show little-

known designers as they are to cover the big brands. Having said that, it would look pretty strange if we didn't cover the major designers – it's what our readers expect of us.'

Carine Roitfeld, editor of *Vogue's* French edition, confirms this opinion: 'We're not obliged to show any particular designer. In fact, due to our position in the marketplace – the power of the *Vogue* name – we have an extraordinary amount of liberty. This is not the case for everyone, and I think the readers notice when a magazine has completely sold out. I am respectful of our advertisers, but I have a duty to my readers and to myself to promote young, promising designers. And I think even the biggest advertisers accept that their clothes and advertisements look better in a dynamic environment. It can be best described as a sort of mutual understanding – a partnership.'

The methods fashion editors use to choose the clothes they feature merit a brief explanation. Most of them rely on 'look books' – a sort of catalogue sent to them by the fashion brands to present each season's collection. But Roitfeld says upcoming young designers can break through simply by being pushy. 'In my experience, American designers are far more confident and ambitious than their European counterparts. In New York, people will approach me and talk to me about their work. It happens much less over here.'

Nevertheless, small and mid-range designers with severely limited or non-existent advertising budgets complain that they feel excluded from glossy magazines. The French designer Isabel Marant states bluntly, 'To be well known in fashion today, you have to appear in the women's press. But, without buying advertising, it's almost impossible. The relationship within the fashion business is one of give-and-give: "You pay, and I'll give you some editorial. You don't pay, and I'll write about you when I have the room." Fashion journalists, rain or shine, are in the grip of their advertising departments. Advertising is a very heavy burden for a small fashion house like mine.' (*Isabel Marant: Un bon vêtement raconte une histoire*, *L'Express*, 6 September 2004.)

There is no doubt that glossy magazines wield tremendous marketing clout. Over the years, the fashion press has handed many designers a place in history. It was Carmel Snow, the editor of American *Vogue*, who wrote of Christian Dior's designs in 1947: 'This is a new look!' And the support of Hélène Lazareff, the founder of *Elle*, was fundamental to Gabrielle Chanel's comeback in 1954, when the designer was severely

out of favour – having ill-advisedly spent the Occupation shackled up in the Ritz with a German officer.

Today, fashion fans continue to base buying decisions on what they see in the glossies. April Glassborow at Harvey Nichols says, ‘*Vogue* is still very influential – the photography remains beautiful. I think readers make the separation between the editorial and the advertising; but at the same time they accept that advertising is part of the package.’

Glassborow adds that some of the best fashion coverage can be found in newspapers. She cites the *Style* supplement of *The Times* as particularly effective. And, indeed, it would be churlish not to mention Suzy Menkes, the *International Herald Tribune*’s redoubtable fashion journalist, who is by no means afraid of crossing swords with designers. (Trade magazines, too, do have teeth, with a great deal of respect being accorded to *Women’s Wear Daily*.)

But even some mainstream reporters don’t feel entirely free of the yoke of advertising. Janie Samet, the French equivalent of Suzy Menkes, who has been writing about fashion in *Le Figaro* for many years, tells me, ‘My first newspaper, *L’Aurore*, was actually owned by Marcel Boussac, the then owner of Dior. Newspapers can’t survive without advertising, of course, and it’s worth noting that today luxury companies are their largest advertisers, alongside automobiles. [Luxury brands] use us as auxiliaries of their advertising, in order to promote new shops and so on. Designers measure their column inches to see how much the same space would have cost them in advertising.’

A familiar criticism of the glossies is that the advertising threatens to obscure the editorial, particularly in the early sections of the magazine. In reality, there is a fairly even balance between editorial and ad pages, but the major brands all insist on prime up-front positions. A healthy advertising market also means a top-heavy product.

Nicholas Coleridge comments, ‘The good thing for us is that the big fashion companies believe strongly in the power of advertising. As the likes of LVMH and Gucci have acquired more brands, they’ve been keen to market them. Their system is to buy a fashion or luxury business, improve the product, and then tell lots of people about it very quickly. And they’ve tended to do this through the pages of *Vogue* and the other glossies. At the same time, because their total advertising spend has risen, their negotiating power has increased. Related to this is the way that the competition for good positions, ie as close to the front as possible, has become intense.’

I wonder aloud whether this insistence on being ‘at the front of the book’ isn’t indicative of a lack of imagination or advertising strategy within fashion companies. Coleridge says, ‘Publishing companies are forced to perform a delicate balancing act, juggling what you might call the best seats in the house among big advertisers. You might have expected that, as media buying became more sophisticated, advertisers would begin to take up other positions – but that hasn’t happened at all; rather the reverse. For example, Chanel used not to mind where it was; it minded more about price than about position. Now it cares about position. Dior cares passionately about position, so do Louis Vuitton and Gucci. Dolce & Gabbana has become very prominent. Armani is pushing for better and better positions. Ralph Lauren and Ferragamo “own” historic positions within glossy magazines, and will not let them go.’

He confirms that many brands simply refuse to advertise unless they’re given an up-front position. And as fashion houses have bought one another, they’ve tried to move their subsidiary brands into better positions on the back of the big spenders. For example, if Gucci has an advertising spread in *Vogue*, it can argue that its sister brand Yves Saint Laurent should run alongside it. ‘The most striking trend [in advertising sales] is the desire to upgrade positions. And now the jewellery companies want to push forward too. All this is exacerbated by the luxury companies’ increasing use of media-buying and planning agencies, which sometimes imply that they can negotiate better positions. This can lead to short-term unpleasantness. The fact is of course that a magazine is a 3D object, so not everyone can be first.’

So what can the magazines do? Coleridge smiles mischievously: ‘They pay smooth-tongued publishers to instil a sense of fairness and balance into proceedings.’

Although the clamour for high-profile positions can cause headaches for advertising sales executives, it is a sign that fashion companies still rate glossy magazines as the best way of reaching their target markets. Upmarket fashion brands have little use for television. ‘Television advertising is expensive, and there is colossal waste,’ observes Coleridge. ‘If you take a brand like Saint Laurent, it probably has something like 80,000 potential customers in the whole of the UK. And I would suggest that the most efficient way of reaching them is through one of our magazines. Advertising on, say, Channel Four would cost many

times more, and they would be communicating pointlessly to a large percentage of people who, frankly, would not be interested.’

Television, for its part, has a similar disdain for fashion. Coverage of the subject is thin on the ground, particularly outside the months of the collections. Even the successful cable and satellite service Fashion TV – which claims 500 million viewers worldwide – may make for fine eye candy in trendy bars, but it provides little in the form of commentary. Instead, it screens catwalk shows in an endless parade of nonchalant beauty – a gently sashaying shop window.

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136

The collections

‘For a designer, the fashion show is a way to broadcast ideas. It is a medium.’

It’s both disappointing and illuminating to discover that the focal point of the Paris collections is a shopping mall. Admittedly, it’s a rather grand shopping mall – a subterranean maze below the Louvre museum – but the Carrousel du Louvre is a mall nonetheless, with souvenir shops and clothing retailers and even a Virgin Megastore. Down a flight of steps, tucked discreetly away from the main drag, is the large annex that serves as a rallying point and meeting area during fashion week. The lofty hall is dominated by a huge screen flashing taped runway shows. A semi-circular reception area displays fashion magazines, brochures and flyers. To the right, a white-swathed marquee is the media centre, where accredited fashion journalists can sip coffee, juice, or Champagne, catch up on the gossip, and whizz reports back to head office.

I am not an accredited fashion journalist – I am, as always, an interloper in their world – so I wait outside, observing the comings and goings. Many of the week’s most important shows will take place in the large rooms just off this central hall. Right now, a queue is forming for the Vivienne Westwood presentation, which is due to start in about half an hour. Everybody knows it will not begin on time. That would be unfashionable.

The bi-annual women's prêt-à-porter collections in Paris, which take place in March and October, are among the most important events (some would say they are *the* most important events) in the fashion calendar. This agenda also embraces bi-annual fashion weeks in London, New York and Milan, and their masculine counterparts. There are other fashion weeks around the world – in Miami, Barcelona, Sydney and Hong Kong, to name a few – but they lack the prestige of the four major spectacles. There's a whole raft of trade shows and expos that attract little attention outside the textile industry. And then there are the haute couture shows, which these days have taken on the air of performance art. But we'll return to those later. For the moment, the circus surrounding the spring/summer prêt-à-porter collections is in full swing. This week, as many as 1,800 journalists and 800 buyers are in town. And I'm tagging along.

The hall is already very busy. People arrive and kiss one another on both cheeks, then stand around ostentatiously fanning themselves with their gold-dust invitations. Suzy Menkes of the *International Herald Tribune* sweeps regally past, unmistakable with her cresting-wave hair-do. A parasitical gaggle of hangers-on – a large percentage of them young Japanese fashion addicts – take photographs of everything that moves and pester for spare invitations. Although I, too, am a hanger-on, a residue of pride prevents me from doing the same. I already know that I don't have a chance in hell of getting in to the Westwood show.

And yet, only a few weeks earlier, I interviewed the most important figure on the Paris fashion circuit.

THE POWER BEHIND THE SHOWS

Didier Grumbach is president of the Fédération Française de la Couture, du Prêt-à-Porter des Couturiers et des Créateurs de Mode. In other words, he runs the organization that runs the Paris collections. His office is located in a discreetly elegant building on the Rue du Faubourg Saint Honoré, not far from the French headquarters of *Vogue*, as well as those of many of the fashion houses that his organization represents. Grumbach himself is not a designer, but a businessman. He helped Yves Saint Laurent and Pierre Bergé found Yves Saint Laurent Rive Gauche, and he ran Thierry Mugler until 1997, when he was elected president of the federation. He is, he says, 'completely impartial' in

matters of design; which is just as well, because becoming a member of his organization – and thus gaining permission to show in Paris – is moderately harder than joining a secret society.

Although the federation is best known – to outsiders, at least – for organizing the Paris shows, it has a number of other functions, including teaching and encouraging aspiring designers; representing French fashion abroad; and combating the theft of intellectual property. It is divided into three sections, or *chambres syndicales*: haute couture and men's and women's prêt-à-porter. The Chambre Syndicale de la Haute Couture (of which Grumbach is also president) was created in 1868; the spin-off prêt-à-porter bodies as recently as 1973. Grumbach's umbrella organization oversees all three of them.

He is well aware of his privileged position. 'I could name all my predecessors stretching back to the very beginning,' he says. 'My immediate predecessor stayed for 26 years. The gentleman before him occupied the post from 1937 until 1972. I imagine this demonstrates that they were excellent politicians.' What Grumbach means is that his is an elected position, and that, 'like any president', he could be deposed at any moment. At the time of our meeting, however, he rests comfortably in the knowledge that he was unanimously re-elected in November 2003.

As far as the Paris collections are concerned, the federation's power is absolute. For one thing, it decides which journalists will be admitted. Editors must submit forms providing the circulation figures of their magazines and specifying the names of the reporters and photographers who will be covering the event. Their requests can be rejected. The final list is sent to the fashion designers and their PR representatives, who then choose which journalists they wish to invite.

Even more crucially, the organization draws up the schedule of shows and assigns locations. This dates back to the 1970s, when it was decided that all designers should show their collections in close proximity, 'in order to present the public with a general outlook of the fashion designers' creations and facilitate the work of French and foreign journalists', to quote its website (www.modeaparis.com). (Note here the rather ironic use of the word 'public', when in fact the collections are strictly off-limits to mere mortals.)

'The timetable is more or less the same each year,' Grumbach explains. 'Each member [of the *chambre syndicale*] has a specific slot, and no member can take the place of another. The exception comes

when a label decides not to show for a season or so – as was the case in recent years with Kenzo and Lacroix, who returned again only last season – in which case other designers can move into their places. Generally, we reserve the first day for young brands that have begun exporting to Asia and America, meaning that they have potential. We have to place certain major designers in specific locations, because there are not many spaces in Paris that can accommodate up to 1,500 people, with all the security and organizational problems that entails.’

The Carrousel du Louvre is the administrative centre of the collections, and two rooms off its main hall can hold, respectively, 1,200 and 1,500 people. A marquee erected for the occasion in the Tuileries gardens can seat a further 1,200. Smaller locations are dotted around the city, but, ideally, they should never be more than a short taxi ride away from the Carrousel.

‘There are 11 shows a day,’ Grumbach explains, ‘which is an enormous figure, embracing all nationalities: not just French, but English, American, Japanese, Belgian, Italian. . . Paris remains the international window for fashion design. You can be a genius in London, but to gain true international status, you must eventually show in Paris. This has always been the case, from Worth to McQueen.’

Like most decisions in the surprisingly conservative world of high fashion, membership of the *chambres syndicales* is based firmly on business performance. Those elected to the clan are judged in terms of potential or existing international sales. As Grumbach points out, ‘A buyer from America doesn’t travel all the way to Paris to buy something that already exists in America. So they are looking for something truly innovative. Interest from abroad is one of the key things we look for when we are considering applications for membership.’

Prospective members send a letter to the *chambre syndicale*, which then dispatches an application form. The designer must return it, along with a hefty press portfolio. ‘And while a good review from Suzy Menkes helps,’ Grumbach says, ‘we’re particularly interested in the international spread of the coverage.’

Grumbach also stresses the importance of what he calls ‘the godfather figure’. Prospective members must secure the support of an established name in fashion who can state their case before the election committee. ‘It is necessary to have a sponsor who can speak on your behalf, and explain why you should be admitted. This is, never forget, a club. If Christian Lacroix sends a letter insisting that you are the next big thing,

it helps. And if Jean-Paul Gaultier is advising your company – bearing in mind that you are, in some ways, his competitor – we generally respect that.’

He adds that the sponsor should be the president or CEO of a fashion brand, not just a designer. Once again, although fashion is a creative industry, executives have the greatest influence.

COMMUNICATION VIA CATWALK

But it’s not just the brazenly clubby nature of the Paris collections that might dissuade a designer from showing in the French capital. In fact, a number of developments have placed a question mark over the wisdom of holding fashion shows at all – not just in Paris, but in all the main markets.

The most obvious is the availability on the web of images from a show less than an hour after the designer has taken a bow. Extensive web coverage means that buyers from stores are no longer obliged to attend shows. It also plays into the hands of counterfeiters and copyists, who can have knocked-off versions of the clothes on sale before the original designers have finished taking orders from buyers. Grumbach says this is ‘not just a concern – it is collective suicide’. He tempers this by adding, ‘Of course, there is no rule that says designers must show in public. But they want to maintain visibility, and there is nothing like a fashion show to display their art. It is a way to broadcast their ideas. It is a medium.’

These days, most buyers place orders at private ‘pre-collection’ gatherings in showrooms, during which the designers present straightforward commercial versions of the garments they will later send out on to the catwalks. Matthew Williamson, for instance, holds two pre-collection events, in January and June. The brand’s managing director, Joseph Velosa, says, ‘The pre-collection is usually unashamedly commercial: the essence of your signature without the £3,000 dress or the £6,000 coat. The overheads and the razzamatazz aren’t there, so people like me approve of it because there are no up-front costs. It’s just about product, in a room, that buyers respond to. Some of the brands sell as much as 70 per cent of their wholesale stock at pre-collection. So by the time the catwalk collection comes around, if the pre-collection was received positively, the designer feels much more confident and free to

experiment. Shows are therefore becoming less commercial and more theatrical. They are less and less a direct selling tool.'

April Glassborow, senior buyer for international designer collections at Harvey Nichols, agrees that attending fashion shows is no longer an essential part of her job. 'It's true that we do a large percentage of our work at pre-collection stage. You see things that are less expensive, more basic, and clearly indicative of key styles and colours. And you struggle to justify going to the collections when you can see everything on *Vogue.com* from your own desk. There's a lot to be said for the lights, the music, the sheer drama of the shows – but the fact is that they are more important for the media than for buyers.'

Fashion shows are, in fact, live advertisements. They are expensive and extravagant, but, according to Velosa, very effective. He says, 'People outside the industry think it's crazy: "You work for six months for something that lasts for ten minutes?" But actually those ten minutes are vital, because everyone is hyper-sensitive to what you're saying. They're all looking at your stage sets, the models you've been able to pull in, your front-row celebrities, whether [*American Vogue* editor] Anna Wintour has turned up... You are gauged hot or not every six months. And of course the product is out there on the biggest pedestal you could imagine. The product has to be right, of course, that's the cornerstone. But if you get everything around it right too, you can change it from being merely a good product into a hot product. The press write about you, the buyers see your name in magazines, and, because they're like vacuum cleaners sucking up everything new, when the next collection comes around they want to come and see you.'

Needless to say, fashion designers don't design fashion shows – not entirely, anyway. In Paris alone, a directory's worth of event organizers and set designers are on hand to help them create their spectacular showcases.

Thierry Dreyfus is a freelance lighting designer and show director working regularly with a company called Eyesight, whose past clients have included Cacharel, Chloé, Dior Homme, Paul & Joe, Sonia Rykiel and Yves Saint Laurent. In his view, 'The fashion show is not an art – it is an element of marketing. For the amount you invest in a show, you can generate between ten and a hundred times the cost in free advertising, in terms of photos in magazines and newspapers, television coverage and so forth. One designer told me that if he does a good show he doesn't have to buy advertising space for a year.'

Companies such as Eyesight and their associates have a lot on their plate. Selecting the models, organizing fittings, devising the running order, coordinating accessories, liaising with stylists, hairdressers and make-up artists, arranging sound, lighting, security, catering and seating plans are just a few of the things that must be taken care of. Occasionally, the event organizer is responsible for luring celebrities to events. 'Sometimes they want to come, sometimes they are invited, and sometimes they are paid,' Dreyfus reveals.

Perhaps the greatest of their challenges is creating the 'mood' of the show. People like Dreyfus are paid to ensure that the message the designer wants to get across is evident not just to the people sitting in the room, but also in the resulting media coverage. 'Every detail is important. For instance, because of digital photography, the way photographs are taken is changing, so we have to take account of that in the lighting. It's sort of a magic trick. Each designer wants to ensure that when you see an image from his show, you can immediately identify his particular look. The show has to illustrate the brand.'

Given the importance of accessories, runway shows are likely to have an increasingly close connection with a brand's advertising strategy. For example, Chanel's spring/summer 2005 show featured Nicole Kidman re-enacting her costly TV spot for Chanel No. 5. And Louis Vuitton's show that same season featured clashing metallic colours purposely designed to make audiences yearn for a pair of the branded sunglasses paraded by the models.

Dreyfus denies that fashion shows have become more about special effects than clothes – 'their main goal is still to show the way fabric moves on a human body' – but he admits that designers are under increasing pressure to make an impact. 'An important journalist like Carine Roitfeld or Suzy Menkes, assuming they've already been to the collections in New York and Milan by the time they arrive in Paris, could end up seeing 40 or 50 shows by the end of a season. So the trick is to be remembered.'

Dreyfus is unwilling to reveal the cost of staging a fashion show, but estimates range from £20,000 to well over £100,000. Dreyfus says, 'Certainly, if you're a young designer, my advice would be not to show. Rent a showroom, ask a couple of friends to model your clothes, try to develop personal relationships with the press. Because even if you can get a model agency to lower their price to 800 euros a girl, even if you can get sponsorship from hair and make-up companies, and even if you

can find a cheap venue, it's still going to be less than professional and cost a fortune. Better to wait until you can afford to do it properly.'

Back in Didier Grumbach's office, I'm now dying to see my first show. But how do I get in? 'Well, you can't,' he says, with a laugh that may either be sympathetic, embarrassed, or merely incredulous. Perhaps registering my crestfallen expression, he adds, 'Look, you've got a press card, haven't you? Why don't you come along to the Carrousel, and we'll see what we can do.'

And so, on the first day of the Paris collections, I stroll in to the media centre and explain the situation to the beautiful girl on the front desk. I tell her that I'm writing a book about fashion, that I recently interviewed Didier Grumbach, and that the great man hinted that I might be able to get in to a show or two. She is just about to reply when a young, thrusting type with fashionably dishevelled hair appears at her side. 'Certainly not,' he says, in his clipped French accent. 'I can assure you, monsieur, that if you do not have the correct accreditation, there is nothing we can do for you.'

My fist involuntarily curls in my pocket, but I smile politely and apologize for wasting his time. Clearly I will have to resort to what the French call 'System D': the system for getting around the system.

HAUTE COUTURE LAID LOW

I dread to imagine what it might have been like if I'd tried to talk my way into an haute couture show. As you know, haute couture has its roots in the origins of fashion, when wealthy women had dresses made to measure. There were interminable fittings, and clothes were painstakingly stitched by hand. Prêt-à-porter – or ready-to-wear, to give it its more egalitarian appellation – came along much later, driven by 20th-century technology and the democratization of dress. But as ready-to-wear increased in sophistication, price and marketing support, taking on the names of designers that might previously have been associated only with couture (Yves Saint Laurent Rive Gauche was the pioneer in this field), it nudged haute couture slowly towards irrelevancy.

The haute couture shows are held in January and July. According to the rules of the *Chambre Syndicale de la Haute Couture*, a fashion house can only use the term if it has 'made-to-measure dressmaking activity

in the Paris area'. But this humble phrase disguises the true nature of an haute couture dress, which is to fashion what a Lamborghini is to the automobile industry or a newly discovered Van Gogh to the art world. Hand-made in every detail, fused to the body of the model who displays it (and later, perhaps, to the fabulously wealthy customer who acquires it), an haute couture dress is wearable sculpture. One legendary Chanel creation, hand-embroidered by the celebrated Maison Lesage, is said to have sold for €230,000 a couple of years ago.

And there's the rub. The item above may have been exceptional, but haute couture dresses, being one-offs, are worth tens of thousands of pounds. Didier Grumbach himself admits that there are perhaps only 1,000 haute couture customers in the entire world. I have heard estimates as low as 300. In Paris today the official list of permanent haute couture designers stands at 11: Adeline André, Anne Valérie Hash, Chanel, Christian Dior, Christian Lacroix, Dominique Sirop, Emanuel Ungaro, Franck Sorbier, Givenchy, Jean Paul Gaultier and Maurizio Galante. But the schedule is padded out with young 'associate' designers. Even Gaultier, who started out in ready-to-wear and joined the haute couture clan in 1997, admits that he does it for love rather than money – and his passion has eaten into his label's profits. Lately, the French media have begun loudly wondering whether haute couture is on its last legs.

Yet there are a number of fairly good reasons for keeping haute couture alive. The first is, as ever, marketing. If a fashion show is little more than a live advertisement, then haute couture is the most spectacular commercial break of all. The sublime creations John Galliano produces for Dior, which transform women into Egyptian goddesses, are worth their weight in sunglasses and handbags. They add value to the Dior brand, and keep the Galliano buzz humming nicely.

Bernard Arnault, chairman of LVMH – which owns the house of Dior – said recently, '[Haute couture] is a fantastic tool to demonstrate the prestige of the house. Its impact on all the other lines – clothes, accessories, and cosmetics – is enormous. Of course it's very costly, but it's not our intention to cover the cost through sales.'

The second reason for the existence of haute couture is simply to push the limits of fashion. While prêt-à-porter has become increasingly commercial, fashion still wishes to maintain a shred of credibility as an art form. Haute couture is its laboratory, encouraging experimentation and generating ideas that may, one day, change the way people dress. According to Bernard Arnault, 'It is the domain in which the designer

can go to an extreme... express the ultimate in quality and creativity. And this link is present in the consumer's mind when they buy prêt-à-porter.' This may explain Giorgio Armani's decision in 2005 to begin showing haute couture for the first time.

The third reason – and the most humane – is simply to preserve the craftsmanship that goes into haute couture. As well as the people who work in the designer's atelier, there are a number of cottage industries adding the luxurious touches that give these outfits their appeal. The embroidery house Lesage, the glove-maker Millau, the milliner Maison Michel, exquisite feather creations from André Lemarié and lace from Puy-en-Velay – all these traditions might be lost if haute couture were to vanish for ever.

There is, possibly, a middle ground. While haute couture customers are a rare breed indeed – limited mainly to royalty and celebrities – fashion currently has a taste for individuality. The bland uniformity of globalization means that customization and novelty are *à la mode*. With typical prescience, Prada recently identified the need for a new type of garment, somewhere between couture and prêt-a-porter – partly hand-made, adjusted to fit the customer, and released only in limited numbers. Called the 'Prada Evening Project', the collection consisted of around 30 models, each labelled from one to 100. The pieces were inspired by the regular Prada collection, but were hand-embroidered with sequins or Swarovski crystals, and produced in luxurious silk, satin and chiffon. *Vogue* pointed out, 'While allowing fashion to reclaim its artistic status, the collections also give those who buy them the idea. . . that they have acquired more than a simple product, but a little masterpiece.' (*Prada de 1 à 100*, October 2004.) There is more of this, surely, to come.

FRONT-ROW FEVER

The seating arrangements at Paris fashion shows are clearly defined and almost invariable. On either side of the runway, there are separate blocks of seating for VIPs, magazine journalists and buyers. French journalists get a block to themselves. The UK is lumped in with the United States. Japan is seated, inexplicably, with Italy; the rest of Europe peers out from behind the battery of TV cameras. The buyers get a block of their own. The daily newspapers, which provide the swiftest exposure to the largest audience, are given the best vantage point at the front of the

room, close to Didier Grumbach. The seating plan strives to observe political sensitivities: for instance, US *Vogue* must not be placed next to either UK *Vogue* or *Harper's Bazaar*. Certain journalists – notably Carine Roitfeld of *Vogue* France and Suzy Menkes of the *International Herald Tribune* – automatically get the best seats.

The entire front-row phenomenon is fascinating. Fashion journalists will tell you that it is vital that they sit in the front row, because it enables them to see the clothes properly – including the shoes. But, off the record, they admit that it is as much about status as it is about professionalism. The further back you are, the less important you (and, by extension, your publication) are perceived to be. And if you receive one of the dreaded 'standing' invitations, reserved mainly for students, it might be better not to turn up at all.

Personally, I would be happy to stand. After my brush with the bouncer at the media centre, I return to my office and start phoning PR people. I eventually make contact with a small brand called Impasse de la Défense, created by the designer Karim Bonnet. Based on a back street of the lively 18th *arrondissement* – from which his brand gets its name – he fuses fashion with art, producing bohemian hand-painted dresses. As I live near by, I'll effectively be supporting my local designer. I get through to a young woman and explain why I want to see the show.

'Sure,' she says, brightly. 'We'll send you an invitation right away.'

It arrives the very next morning, and I note with considerable pleasure that the show will be held at the Salle Wagram, an ancient ballroom notable for its brief appearance in the film *Last Tango in Paris*. When I turn up, even though my new friend Karim is not quite on a par with Vivienne Westwood, there are plenty of people milling around outside. I even spot the requisite Japanese students begging for invitations. Clutching mine, I feel an uncharacteristic surge of condescension.

Finally the doors open, and we can escape the late-October drizzle. The theme of the show is 1960s pop music, and a psychedelic sitar band twangs merrily away in the lobby. There is a vague whiff of incense. I hand my invitation nervously to one of the two pretty young women standing at the entrance to the hall, casually mentioning that I'm a journalist.

'Oh,' she says, beaming. 'In that case, you'd better sit in the front row.'

With a sense of triumph that is utterly misplaced, I settle into my seat. I have been there for approximately five minutes when another young woman approaches.

‘I’m terribly sorry,’ she says. ‘But I’m afraid you’ll have to move back a row. These seats are reserved for the journalists from *Madame Figaro*.’

Any trace of superiority I might have felt drifts away like chiffon in a cold draught. As I get to my feet, a perfumed gaggle of forty-something ladies bears down on me. These are the representatives of *Madame Figaro*, the venerable French women’s magazine. I may be supporting my local designer, but during the collections, those with a short-cut to the buying public will always have the upper hand.