Transmediality at High/Low Culture Cross-Roads:

High Fashion and Low-fi Video in the Work of Thebe Magugu







Hannah Fleisch University of Toronto This was a paper given at the CSGSU Conference on March 11, 2023, with the theme "Bad Objects" for the panel "Categorically Bad." While film and fashion have long been intertwined and in conversation, the pandemic has seen an accelerated rise of video as a crucial tool for high fashion collections, seeing the "fashion film" emerging as a hybrid media object. As fabric and texture become bridging concepts theoretically between these two worlds, I'm interested in interventions where this relationship is used to rethink and unsettle reigning notions of taste and global political hierarchy through formal representation. Encountering his work initially through YouTube, I've been intrigued by the rising South African fashion designer, Thebe Magugu. He has gained prominence in the past few years internationally in parallel to video's increasing ubiquity in the high fashion space. Magugu has made video a central part of his fashion messaging and storytelling, introducing a distinct visual language across three spaces: his physical collections, digital presence, and video archive in the form of his website.

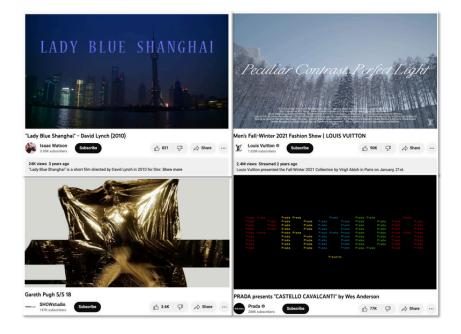
Thebe Magugu is a designer currently working and manufacturing his collections in Johannesburg, under his eponymous brand which has been running since 2016. He showcases Ready-to-Wear Men's and Women's collections as part of the fashion calendar – showing at major events like Paris Fashion Week and in arts spaces like the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. He releases typically 1-2 collections a year as part of the SS season or AW season that much of the fashion world centred in Europe typically abides by. Magugu's collections involve South African history and politics as underlying themes embedded in his designs. In collaboration with South African video artists and filmmakers including Kristen-Lee Moolman and Francesco "Franadilla" Mbele, Thebe Magugu has increasingly been pairing seasons with an introductory overarching video. These videos marry a low-fi aesthetic with a high culture luxury fashion product, challenging and juxtaposing the pristine and targeted style expected of the profit-driven industry.



I want to start by examining the fashion film in general as an object. In this, I will be drawing from Roland Barthes' The Fashion System and Giuilana Bruno's Surfaces to start thinking through the relationship between non-theatrical film and clothing, using ideas of fabric and texture to connect them. Through Mark Wolf's conception of transmediality, I will look at how the narrative of Magugu's clothing collections is expanded in video form. The use of low-fi aesthetics is evidence of Magugu formally translating the conceptual narrative of his designs. Magugu's designs and videos emerge as transmedial worldbuilding that centres the South African local in global conversations and European high-fashion spaces, challenging definitions of high/low quality and taste. To start, I want to draw attention to concept of the "fashion film."

I'm using the term "fashion film" here to describe a narrative, documentary or experimental moving-image-work made with the intention of showcasing a fashion designer's clothing or whole collection. It's often used as short, supplementary material or in-place of a physical runway. The increasing number of fashion film festivals across the world in the last two decades as well as the necessity for digital runways during the pandemic have seen the rise of this form in the industry, although it is still widely untouched in the cinema studies field as an object of aesthetic or historical analysis. In terms of the opportunity for scholarship, I'd liken to the "music video" as a form that interplays music and film and is often overlooked as an object of study, although this is starting to change.



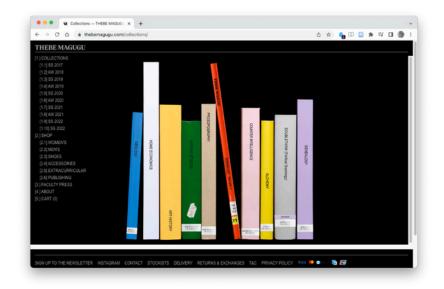


Barthes' The Fashion System is interested in semiotics and methodology, thinking through the relation between the physical garment and the text garment. His focus on fashion writing is premised on the fact that the physical garment itself is secondary to a system of taste and conception of what is fashionable, constructed through intricacies of fashion writing that imbue it with value. Barthes writes, "As soon as we observe Fashion, we discover that writing is constitutive ... the system of actual clothing is always the natural horizon which Fashion assumes in order to constitute its signification: without discourse, there is no total Fashion, no essentialized Fashion" (Barthes 1990: xi). This conception is foundational to this project which imagines the relation between the physical-clothing and the "moving-image-garment" – something I understand as both image-garment and written-garment as it is written into the cinematic text and narrative of the video.

Bruno's looks at the relation in a more specific sense – examining the materiality of the image. She regards the "surface" of film, "as a site of mediation and projection" (Bruno, 2014, p. 3). Fashion is constituted as an art and, with it, argued as a material repository and extension of a film's meaning (Bruno, 2014, p. 39). Bruno writes, "materiality involves a refashioning of our sense of space and contact with the environment, as well as a rethreading of our experience of temporality, interiority, and subjectivity" (Bruno, 2014, p. 8). To extend on this, the encounter of materials can also refashion our perceptions of taste and encourage a reflection on the conditions under which this taste is formed.



Having laid out the fashion film and its relationship between clothing and video as a methodology, I'm going to look at some of Magugu's work. All Magugu's collections involve an intellectual project of some kind, named after a class in the case of "Home Economics" and "Geology" or a political/social concept in the case of "Counter-intelligence," "Doublethink" and "Discard Theory." Magugu has released 5 films on his youtube channel and inbedded these on their respective collection pages on his website, along with shownotes, photographs, and written descriptions of the garments. I'm going to be examining two collections in particular: AW21 Alchemy and SS23, Discard Theory, both womens-wear collections.







THEBE MAGUGU SS21 -"COUNTER INTELLIGENCE"

24K views • 2 years ago





"UNIVERSAL ELIXIR" - A Documentary by...



Thebe Magugu AW21 -BANYOLOYI A BOSIGO

32K views • 2 years ago



THEBE MAGUGU SS22 -"GENEALOGY

12K views • 1 year ago



THEBE MAGUGU SS23 -"DISCARD THEORY" [The...

3.7K views + 5 months ago







SS22 GENEALOGY

AW21

ALCHEMY

SS23 DISCARD THEORY In AW21 "Alchemy," Magugu describes traditional healers as a point of inspiration for the collection, engaging in mythology, spirituality, and local customs. For Magugu, this is woven into the design references in the clothing, using "silhouettes [that] merge local traditional wardrobe solves like draping and wrapping with complex and sharp tailoring." This serves to disrupt a traditional/modern dichotomy often associated with representations of African countries on a global stage.

The accompanying film, "Ultimate Midnite Angels" (2021) is a fictional piece involving a conflict between two glamorous and violent rivaling female gangs. In it, a forbidden queer relationship forms between two women from the opposing sides. As a result of the action; blood, dirt and other blemishes impact the clothing, alienating it from its connotations as a pristine, exclusive high fashion product. While the film's mise-en-scene displays the clothing as a central element of the film, the clothing is also obscured, damaged and worn in, mirroring the blemishes as part of the texture of the video itself.



This distinct surface of the image, characterised by lens flares, dirt and moisture on camera is taken a step further in Universal Elixir, the film made by Franadilla which documents the behind-the-scenes process of making Ultimate Midnite Angels.

This is made entirely using a camcorder, functioning almost like a homevideo. With this mode of filmmaking, the moving-image-clothing is again represented differently, under dressing gowns, in between takes or as the subject of handheld zooms as Frandilla documents the backstage spectacle of the shoot. With the familiar home-video quality; the models and clothing are not unattainable, fantastically graceful, or luxurious. Different voices of the director, designer and other members of the cast and crew narrate the footage, illustrating the collaborative nature of the project as evidence of throughline aesthetic from physical to digital work.















This brings me to the second concept, that of transmediality. In Building Imaginary Worlds, Mark Wolf defines transmediality as, "the state of being represented in multiple media" (247) and that a transmedial object is "present in multiple forms of mediation" (247). Wolf uses here the example of the Star Wars world which, after being conceived of as a written text in the form of a screenplay, was made into the audio-visual film, adapted into a series of novels, television shows, animated series and physical objects in the form of LEGO sets.

Transmediality at the site of the "fashion film" characterises the relationship between the material, physical collection and the audiovisual form. Relating to Bruno's work, our conception of costume is that it is a part of the cinematic diegesis and integrated into the film world. Here, the film itself retains its status as the primary object. In the fashion film, the clothing is the primary object, with the video representation of it as a secondary, supplementary object created after the clothing, in service of it, expanding on the original narrative and concept of the collection. The latest film released by Magugu, SS23 "Discard Theory" is also made by Franadilla, pushing the aesthetics even further with intentional alitches and different kinds of digital cameras used. The film investigates the process developing the collection itself, centered around "conspicuous consumption." For this collection Maguau goes to downtown Johannesburg to the neighbourhood of "Dunusa," where second-hand garments are piled, sorted through and bought cheaply. This is an example of the phenomenon of second-hand fashion waste being distributed to countries across Africa from America and Europe. Maguau visits this site not far from his own studio. He prioritises the local in his manufacturing too, producing all the products in house while many others move to fashion centres like Paris and London to manufacture their collections. The film features Magugu cutting up and refashioning garments from Dunusa into new items. He does this without losing the clothing's connections to the city centre despite being elevated to the high fashion stage.



To tie in the third key concept of this project which has been hinted at throughout, the combination of high and low styles is a conscious choice of Magugu's. This "High/low" concept can be described on many different levels: high or low fidelity in terms of quality; high or low economic value; high or low art in terms of aesthetic value and cultural capital. A crossroads of high and low describes the co-presence of both in one object or space – bringing up the value of a cheap item and degrading a luxurious one. In this way – the co-presence brings up an awareness of formations of aesthetic value and taste, bringing us back to Barthes.

To draw on Kant's conceptions of aesthetics, there is a relationship between an object's aesthetic value, its use/purpose and the sensation or pleasure it produces. The commonly termed "high-end" fashion world involves expensive fabrics and expertly cut designs. This is a source of pleasure and cultural capital, as well as a site for innovative conceptual explorations. To contrast, the cheap, accessible technology on which the digital image is created has a grating effect, with the main source of pleasure, if any, lying in its nostalgic factor. To invoke Rombes' account for these digital, DV aesthetics; degraded footage and rough "mistakism" in independent filmmaking can be viewed as a reaction to the "clean, pure, "perfect copy" logic of the digital era." (Rombes, 2019, p. 27) Here, the poor image is a conscious choice when faced with the opportunity for a high quality and high value object.

The filmmaker of Discard theory, Franadilla, cites fleeting cycles of taste as the impulse to use this aesthetic: "I find the cycles of 'cool' and 'uncool' that seem to interchange is so interesting... mediums and subject matter were changing so fast, that in a lot of ways they weren't really fleshed out or taken to their limits. So being able to use those forms of expressions from different eras, and make them both new and nostalgic, is really fun to do" (Interview with Connect Everything Collective).

JOHANNESBURG, SOUTH AFRICA



VOICE OF THEBE MAGUGU Considering the centrality of the South African identity, history and iconography to his collections, in addition to South Africa's marginality to the fashion world, the formal representation of low-fi aesthetics in this luxury space causes a disruption. To tie this all together, I want to look at one of the outfit's featured in the Discard Theory collection in particular (Look 5). This derives its dominant pattern motif from a common place item in South Africa, the white, red and blue striped bag.

Repeated and enlarged, the bag becomes the backdrop for Magugu's runway for the show last October in the Victoria and Albert Museum, his first international runway under his own brand name. In the picture beside it is Magugu 11 years earlier, wearing the bag in the form of an outrageous fascinator headpiece at his very first African Fashion Week which, as a student, he sneaks into. The bag, with the red, white and blue colonial colours of the British flag, is seen throughout Southern Africa as a symbol of migration, often used as the way of transporting one's belongings as people relocate and move around the region. In this way, the bag is symbolically weighted, as an object signifying temporal and spatial movement through its history, flows of migration, and ties to local economy and colonialism. There is a 4 step transmedial growth here. We see the physical-object low-value bag in plastic; transform into the physical-object fashion accessory in plastic; into physical-garment highfashion dress in cloth; and finally into the moving-image-garment in degraded low-fi digital surface.

Magugu's collaborations touch between local and global; the historical and contemporary; and high and low fashion worlds. The geneology of this item through different physical and digital media is emblematic of Magugu's transmedial work and the opportunities for conceptual richness and disruption that the "fashion film" holds.









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