

## Mything in action: Fashion designers in documentary film

Katie Baker Jones, West Virginia University

Keywords: documentary film, fashion studies, discourse studies, fashion designers

“Fashion is an industry of stagecraft...seeing the sweat and tears and computer modeling that goes into making it could destroy its transformative appeal. But this is an age of direct communication and transparency...To be part of the modern world, fashion has to let people in, yet its mystique is built on keeping them out. What’s a brand to do?” (Friedman, 2015, p. D7). Enter the myth-building juggernaut of fashion documentary: offering the illusion of transparency and access while carefully controlling the rules of engagement. Analyzing fashion documentarian Loïc Prigent’s work, Rees-Roberts noted that, “the rise of the behind-the-scenes (BTS) documentary fashion film can be attributed to a collective desire for access to the backstage of the prestigious designer-branded shows” (2016, p. 151). Both voyeuristic compulsion and the documentary-as-promotion model are obvious and compelling *raison d’être* for these films. However, I seek to deconstruct the film narratives to examine the ‘how’ and ‘to what end’ of their myth building. What does being a fashion designer mean in these carefully constructed worlds? What mythic structure or strategy is used to build these icons? How do viewers come to know the designer and their cultural worth through this medium?

As in other media discourses, documentary is a constitutive process, “...bring[ing] the situation it shows (and the ways it shows it) into existence” (Bonner, 2013, p. 71). In this instance documentary reifies, if only briefly, the ‘fashion designer’ as a mode of being, its routines, defining traits, and social capital/value. In this way, documentaries recontextualize (Van Leeuwen, 2008) the social practice of fashion design. Furthermore, “documentaries also work as journalistic inquiry and exposition, using commentary and interviews as forms of reportage and witnessing” (Bonner, 2013, p. 81). With the boundaries between documentary and journalistic practice blurring (Craft, 2018), fashion documentaries are an extension of fashion and lifestyle journalism. In an age where entertainment value supersedes journalistic reporting and documentaries serve as entertainment and diversion (Corner, 2002), fashion is a consummate collaborator. The industry is a paragon of the commodification of artistic expression which documentary film can turn to its advantage. This critical qualitative inquiry engages social semiotic theory (Hodge & Kress, 1988) to examine five documentaries produced in the last decade (Table 1). I ‘read’ the documentaries as multimodal texts (Kress, 2010), seeking to delineate the discursive practices engaged by designers, directors, and the diverse cast of satellite characters recruited to tell their story.

Table 1

*Documentaries included in inquiry*

Film Title	Designer subject	Release date	Run time
<i>Very Ralph</i>	Ralph Lauren	2019	108 minutes
<i>Yellow is Forbidden</i>	Guo Pei	2018	97 minutes
<i>Westwood</i>	Vivienne Westwood	2018	83 minutes
<i>Dries</i>	Dries Van Noten	2016	90 minutes
<i>Dior and I</i>	Raf Simons for Dior	2014	110 minutes

The narratives established by the five films were highly intertextual, keen to associate through well-established narratives and signs. Intertextual narratives heighten the social power held by their subjects and signal in-group association for knowledgeable viewers (Fairclough, 2015, p. 164). For both Raf Simons and Guo Pei, relative outsiders to the heady world of French *haute couture*, the specters of fashion greats both haunted and inspired them throughout their films. *Dior and I* used multiple modalities to impress upon the viewer the constant presence of the house's long-departed founder, while Guo Pei waxed poetic on the influence Marie Antoinette and Cristobal Balenciaga have had on her work. By hailing previously established mythic figures relevant to their fashion narrative, the designer was simultaneously elevated to mythic realms.

Filming the designer's home life was another discursive practice to situate them in a world beyond the ordinary. The grounds and extensive libraries in which designers strolled or lounged, surrounded by a mixture of kitsch and fine furnishings, served as set dressing to portray designers as neo-bohemian artists. In the intimacies of home, the creative genius dwelled and was replenished. Aside from the trappings of wealth, their quirky tastes (Guo Pei's teddy bear collection, Vivienne Westwood's ensembles), artistic living (Dries Van Noten's flower arranging), and grandiose estates (Ralph Lauren) signaled cloistered worlds providing escapism, protection, and inspiration in equal measure. Raf Simons was the only designer who seemed to exist solely within the walls built by Dior, further underlining the claustrophobic nature of the founder's presence.

Though the mythic figure of the creative genius was established early in each film, counternarratives of cooperation and collaboration eventually appeared. Many of these narratives centered on support received from family or an intimate partner (who for Van Noten, Pei, and Westwood was also their business partner). *Dior and I* devoted the most amount of screen time to creators at the house other than Raf Simons, and the only film to spend considerable time in the ateliers giving direct voice to the *petite mains*. However, the films universally held the fashion show as the ultimate expression of the designer's accomplishments and abilities. As is tradition, the fashion show spectacle centered the documentary subject taking their bow, reinforcing the hierarchy and power held by the central designer figure.

The fashion designer documentary, these five and others like them, exemplify a Whig interpretation of history (Carr, 1961). Each designer (and their corroborators) [re]writes their entry into the fashion history narrative, justifying their inclusion through a discourse of inevitable greatness. *Very Ralph* is the most egregious of these narratives. The "manifest destiny" of Ralph Lauren's "conquering" of the American fashion landscape is never questioned save one critique from fashion journalist, Vanessa Friedman. After a segment that reflected upon hip hop's appropriation of the Polo Ralph Lauren aesthetic, Friedman stated, "[Lauren's] real adherence to these narratives of America that are core to his brand can get a little stale, particularly at a time when I think a lot of people who have not felt included...are finding their voice and demanding that you kind of rewrite how we have thought about all of these stories" (Lacy, 2019). This is the exception that proves the rule. The myth must prevail because its purpose is greater than the canonization of one human; it is the life blood of the fashion designer's corporate empire – Vivienne Westwood's protestations aside. Documentaries attempt to preempt the historian; the comprehensive narrative, particularly one in which the subject is so actively involved, constructs an illusion that is difficult to assail. Though fashion may try in these narratives, as Rees-Roberts noted, to "theorize itself by unpacking its own methods of design and production" (2016, p. 151), the semiotic

resources of mythic lore and deeply rooted intertextualities often obscure the human beneath the ‘fashion designer’ facade.

#### Works cited

- Bonner, F. (2013). Recording reality: Documentary film and television. In S. Hall, J. Evans, & S. Nixon (Eds.), *Representation* (Second edition, pp. 60–119). Sage ; The Open University.
- Brettkelly, P. (2018). *Yellow is forbidden* [Film]. Avrotros & Svt.
- Carr, E. H. (1961). *What is history?* Vintage.
- Corner, J. (2002). Performing the Real: Documentary Diversions. *Television & New Media*, 3(3), 255–269. <https://doi.org/10.1177/152747640200300302>
- Craft, S. (2018). Documentary Journalism. In T. P. Vos (Ed.), *Journalism* (pp. 415–432). De Gruyter. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781501500084-021>
- Fairclough, N. (2015). *Language and power* (Third edition). Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.
- Friedman, V. (2015, April 1). Fashion has much to gain from honest documentaries. *The New York Times*. D7.
- Hodge, B., & Kress, G. R. (1988). *Social semiotics*. Cornell University Press.
- Holzemer, R. (2018). *Dries* [Film]. Reiner Holzemer Film.
- Kress, G. R. (2010). *Multimodality: A social semiotic approach to contemporary communication*. Routledge.
- Lacy, S. (2019). *Very Ralph* [Film]. HBO.
- Rees-Roberts, N. (2016). Backstage with Loïc Prigent: Documenting process from Gaultier to Chanel. *Film, Fashion & Consumption; Bristol*, 5(2), 149–164.
- Tcheng, F. (2014). *Dior and I* [Film]. Paramount Pictures Corporation.
- Tucker, L. (2018). *Westwood: Punk, Icon, Activist* [Film]. Finished Films.
- Van Leeuwen, T. (2008). *Discourse and practice: New tools for critical discourse analysis*. Oxford University Press.