



The house always wins: Designer appointments at historic fashion houses

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In March of 2011 the fashion world was shocked to learn one of their greatest talents had been suspended and then fired from one of the most coveted design positions available due to anti-Semitic comments uttered during a drunken tirade (Horyn, 2011). As the creative director of one of the world's most well known fashion brands, Christian Dior, Galliano's fall from grace was of interest to both industry insiders and the general public, alike. The media coverage that followed ran the gamut of topics: social outcry against the designer, Dior's swift reaction, the subsequent speculation, and the eventual validation of the designer hired to replace Galliano. With such detailed reporting every step of the way, the press became the stage for this modern melodrama. The press's power as producer of discourse and meaning suggests their role in this process should not be ignored.

Historic fashion houses—those that continue to exist well after the death or retirement of their namesake—have struggled to find designers capable of carrying on both the legacy and the continued financial success of the brand. When these houses are in need of a new designer the hiring process is frequently a public affair. As gatekeepers to the fashion world, the media keeps interested parties abreast of the proceedings and subsequent results of the hiring process. Though the goal may be simply to report, news discourse's rhetorical elements have the power to persuade audiences, giving immense power to the gatekeeper (Dijk, 1988). While the evolution of many historic houses including Dior, Chanel, and Lanvin, have been well documented in various mediums such as books, journal articles, exhibitions and films, few of these take into account the media's role in the house's evolution. Specifically, the media's reporting and evaluation of new designer hires has been largely ignored.

A study of the news discourse concerning the search for, announcement, and evaluation of new designer appointments at historically established fashion houses was undertaken to explore the framing of these events in the media. Since the media both acts on and is acted upon by culture (Dijk, 1988), exploring the media discourse provides a litmus test for a society's perceptions on various subjects of the day. The study questions what discursive practices are employed by popular fashion press to report, analyze, and validate new designer/artistic director appointments at historically established fashion houses. How the discourse situates these processes within the larger context and history of the house was also considered. Christian Dior was purposefully selected for this study due to its longevity—continuously in operation since 1946—and the level of media interest in the seven different designers that have held the top design position at the storied house. *The New York Times* was selected as the site of research due to its accessibility and history of providing readers with coverage of the international fashion scene in both general interest news categories and also dedicated style sections. Critical discourse analysis of 52 articles utilized iterative, comparative, and reflective readings of text to reveal both the socially constructed and the socially constructing elements (Fairclough, 1993).

The *Times* coverage of the six designer changeovers at Dior revealed both socially constituted and constitutive elements. The core social value perpetuated by the articles reviewed was that of economic success and perseverance. Though Dior is representative of a cultural industry, it is first and foremost a business. Two catch phrases that emerged relating to this economic element were ‘the show must go on’ and ‘too big to fail.’ Though the latter is a relatively new media meme, it was found throughout the history of the house. Regardless of what the house encountered—the mental breakdown of Saint Laurent or the anti-Semitic rants of Galliano—Dior must survive at all costs. The *Times* also served a constitutive purpose by establishing the values of historic houses. The first value is represented by the theme of ‘reverence for the founder.’ Though Christian Dior was at the helm for a scant 10 years of the house’s 66-year history, each designer was expected to pay homage to the creator. Their success at the house was largely evaluated based on this one ability. Whether reinventing the 1947 bar suit or incorporating Dior’s favorite flower, each new designer must prove his worth by demonstrating a reverence for history. ‘Royal or papal succession’ is a metaphor that surfaced several times, constituting the value of continuance in the face of change. However, in the face of change, ‘divestiture’ of the previous design head had to occur. What was once found charming in the outgoing designer—Saint Laurent’s age, for example—was re-constituted as a liability. Only then could the new designer be raised up on a platform as the future of the house. Thus the designers became mere pawns in the grand narrative of the house of Dior. The last theme that emerged from the data that was both socially constituted and constitutive was that of media omnipotence. The *Times* journalists regularly used their status as third party observer to reinforce their position within the fashion network. This was achieved by providing historical context to validate designer efforts or spreading the gossip of potential successors.

With the power to persuade, news discourse can shape public opinion on matters of the day including the very public proceedings of new designer appointments. The research explored the discursive practices employed by one specific medium. While the designer is vital to the success of any house, a designer is expendable while a house must last. Limiting the research to one historic house and one newspaper allowed for depth analysis of a particular case. The findings of this research should be expanded by future studies that examine the discursive practices of other media outlets with power such as magazines and blogs. Additionally, the design histories of other historic houses should be examined to expand upon this case study and construct a broader perspective of this phenomenon.

References

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