

“Interpretation is a radical strategy for conserving an old text, which is thought too precious to repudiate, by revamping it”.¹

This phrase appropriately opens up the discussion when looking at fashion and its interpretation. It instantly addresses the fact that there is already a created piece of art initially existing. In the case of fashion, this would pertain to the garment, show or collection. The contrast between the words ‘interpretation’ and ‘conserving’ is shown to highlight the issue. The best way to conserve and keep the value of something would be to leave it be. The value of the subject in question is conserved and protected the more it is left alone. However, to interpret the thing in question includes to assert one’s own beliefs, perspectives and understanding on it. It is not merely conserved or left alone, but rather it is now tainted or engulfed under opinions and subjective notions by the perceiver.

Susan Sontag makes the claim that interpreting a work is to essentially drain it of its content. “Our task is not to find the maximum amount of content in a work of art, much less to squeeze more content out of the work that is already there. Our task is to cut back content so that we can see the thing at all”.² Despite this commentary initially seeming to dismiss the value and sentiment behind interpreting, it is clear there is an attempt to savour the value of the art or subject itself. With the German romanticism theory, this is made clear.

Interpretations seem as though value is only provided once it has been analysed and concluded by the viewer in a completely different way that it is initially presented. As though meaning is found in the sub text (as described by Sontag), rather than overtly. It subtly dismisses the work put in by the artist to present a specific meaning, as it is presented. This view sees interpretations working against the artist; however, it could simply be a case where multiple inferences exist, rather than a secondary impression overriding the initial intent responsible for the creation itself.

A look into intellectual property includes justifications back by positive law.³ There is an importance and emphasis placed on circulation and production, shifting the work from the individual to society. The private law of intellectual property exists to encourage circulation. Sontag’s arguments seem to only encourage circulation of ‘transparent’ art, or ‘non-art’, however each and every artist should be encouraged to share their work, with each choice being deemed as an artistic choice.

After describing transparency as a liberating value in art, Sontag identifies that the better the artist creates their work, the easier it’ll be for people to deconstruct and read it, rather than “mucking about”⁴ it in. However, this implies there is a burden to appreciate art forms, whether it is on the artist to make it transparent enough for people to not have the desire to interpret their own meanings, or for the viewer to just see it objectively as it is, without feeling the need to modify the piece with their own thoughts regarding it.

¹(Sontag, 1961)

² Ibid, 1

³ (Skibstead, 2024)

⁴ Ibid, 1

“Sometimes a writer will be so uneasy before the naked power of his art that he will install within the work itself – albeit with a little shyness, a touch of the good taste of irony – the clear and explicit interpretation of it”.⁵ This is arguably an artistic choice, as there is no real burden truly imposed on an artist in the free realm of creativity. Similarly, one choosing to create pop art, or “non-art”, in deliberate rebellion against the ability to interpret should merely be described as an artistic choice. Unintendingly, the very act of trying to create something “so blatant”⁶ may be interpreted in itself and assessed. Not necessarily the finished result, but analysing the choice and efforts put into creating something so obvious, such as abstract paintings.

Sontag describes the interpretations as an “itch”⁷. However, considering the goodness that comes out of interpretations, it shouldn’t be described so negatively. Different perspectives, especially from people of contrasting backgrounds provides value in people contributing and reinterpreting things. This is especially clear in challenging conventional practices in the industry, especially as it is dominated by the western society. The echo chambers formed aren’t broken, and as each designer extracts inspiration, and things are just a regurgitation of what has already been created, the cycle needs to be broken. Having a fresh perspective, a fresh voice, a new experience to process an artform can bring valuable enhancements that can make the product more accessible for others to enjoy and witness.

She suggests that the act of interpretation “reduces the work of art to its content” and that it “tames art making it manageable and conformable”⁸. However, the complete opposite could be said. Rather interpretation and exposing the art – away from its protect bubble of artistic intentions – to other thoughts concepts and ideas, could elevate it and develop the depth embedded within it.

The MODUS publication is a notable response to the issues presented in the contemporary industry, of overused repeated narratives and conventional practices. It appropriately disrupts this, presenting a new way to communicate in the industry as it transcends the Capitalist model. The platform is run by collaboration and curation, the essence of interpretation. It speaks to the future of the industry as it describes itself to “interrogate social, cultural, political and environmental impacts”.⁹ Sontag presents an idea that we look at art for what it is and accept it. MODUS breaks this and celebrates radical and diverse ways of doing fashion. It describes itself as becoming a “blueprint for new ways of thinking, being and doing fashion”.¹⁰

However, in favour of Sontag’s pessimistic views on interpretations, it should be adopted in more sensitive cases where the viewer mustn’t assert their own subjective thoughts and bias, as they can stem from passive aggressive stances and prejudice. Transparency, as

⁵ Ibid, 1

⁶ Ibid, 1

⁷ Ibid, 1

⁸ Ibid, 1

⁹ <https://modus-project.com/>

¹⁰ Ibid, 9

suggested by Sontag, is crucial when it comes to matters like drag, as it is important to present things as they are. On the other hand, delicacy is required when addressing someone's sexual identity to respect and acknowledge their personal experience. Similarly, with race, it is inappropriate to interpret a Black actress in a role based on stereotypes, such as assuming she was cast because of her ebony skin and then imagining her character as being from the forest. These kinds of interpretations can perpetuate racism¹¹, whether they are overt or subtle. It's essential to see and accept things as they are, without imposing prejudiced perspectives.

With curation and inspirations dominating the creative process in the fashion industry, it is nearly impossible to compartmentalise finished works. It would be impractical and meaningless to look at shows and collections without the act of interpreting. Despite the argument of interpreting being a “task that squeezes content out of the work already there”, it's within the innate nature of a designer to do so – to rethink and reimagine the parts of inspiration to their own collections.

In return, it's the consumers chance to interpret their collection, deciding how they respond to it and how they use the creations. The initial inspiration from the designer has been transformed via repeated interpretations. The concept of “things being what they are” is rendered as pointless in fashion design, as applying surface level value on garments would inhibit the ability for curations and inspirations to occur.

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¹¹(King, 2021)

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