



Surface Level

Expressions



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“The position that an epoch occupies in the historical process can be determined more strikingly from an analysis of its inconspicuous surface-level expressions than from that epoch’s judgments about itself. Since these judgments are expressions of the tendencies of a particular era, they do not offer conclusive testimony about its overall constitution. The surface-level expressions, however, by virtue of their unconscious nature, provide unmediated access to the fundamental substance of the state of things. Conversely, knowledge of this state of things depends on the interpretation of these surface-level expressions. The fundamental substance of an epoch and its unheeded impulses illuminate each other reciprocally.”

Siegfried Kracauer
The Mass Ornament
(1927)

FENTY X PUMA SS17

IVAN CHENG

Violent athleisure; travelling references make function visible. With unanswered questions, references limber, stretch, and muscle towards transience. Sportswear rests upon endorsement and product association, twined with sports and popular culture. Covetous eyes feed on stamped, distinctive goods. Traditionally promoted by sportsmen and increasingly by recording artists, the general visual narrative of these goods is tethered to athletic gifts, if not youth, talent, innovation, or an economic mobility ushered in by otherwise success. Images are manufactured, persistently recognisable, functioning tropes, just as the footwear and apparel receives licks of new colour and form to continue the shifts of units. Flogged through urbanity. Products are branded, exclusive, modular, attainable, endorsed, collectible. What is colour beyond fashion?

This is the pink moment. A global audience watches via a Tidal livestream as R re-emerges from behind-the-scenes, re-straddling the ambiguous terrain of clotheshorse and creative, of recording artist and iconic role model. Brown is a colour that Hannah Black has drawn attention to as unpopular for international collectors of paintings.¹ Brown is the colour that R first models, brown hooded sweatshirt, brown polyester windbreaker styled half-off, brown laced up leggings. Shifting from this monochrome to another, R is now in pink. Think Pink! Immediately brought to mind is the film *Funny Face*,² in which Audrey Hepburn is the unconventional, intellectual beauty brought forth through magazine editorial, a whim of the fashion world for a Hollywood narrative which hinges on the belief that trends pivot from the lips of a select few in control. In pink, R is smiling broadly in a long wig with a neat centre part, no longer in the unpopular brown, a tightly clasped tail invisible from the front. Forehead forbiddingly high as to indicate the presence of a cosmetic wig, perhaps a social gesture to court fashions of years gone by, she overcomes possible distancing with the aid of a natural made up face,

a smokey eye, and a persistent smile. What would she stand for in magazines now?

This is Fenty x Puma SS17, a presentation in Paris of the second collection that bears Robyn Rihanna Fenty's family name. While the first collection was explained as 'Addams Family goes to the gym' and carried references to Japanese street style, this collection is 'Marie Antoinette goes to the gym', filtering ideas of a French monarchy retaining its edge and assimilation of chinoiserie. Both The Addams Family and Marie Antoinette are pop cultural figures laden with behavioural assumptions. The former sits on a moodboard, clippings from their reels of cellulose as dysfunctional but humorous gothic coterie. The latter comes with mediated³ and period-based projections colluding with what she represented, the perhaps excessive figurehead against which the people turned for her hedonistic excess. Decades later the words of Jean-Jacques Rousseau were misattributed to her — *let them eat cake* — "Qu'ils mangent de la brioche". Fury builds at thoughtless words, and Marie Antoinette is heaped with language, a last queen under the guillotine, neck sliced, as though the parting of her head and corpse at her neck might aid the cause of redistributing resources, birthing republics and democracies to the chants of "Austrichienne" (Austrian bitch).

Each collection thus far can then be signified by severance — the spinal cord for Marie Antoinette, and in *The Addams Family*, the disembodied hand which is called The Thing. Annexed from the body, The Thing is part of the family while separate and circulating globally. Puma is a multinational company based in Germany which commands global attention, with their goods and products sold across the republics and democracies which followed the French Revolution. A key competitor, Adidas, was founded on a rift between the brothers Dassler, severance following finger pointing and slander around their participation with the Nazi effort. Adolf 'Adi' Dassler founded Adidas, with Rudolf 'Rudi' Dassler changing his initial business name of Ruda to Puma for the athletic feeling, once he got out of a POW work camp.

In the transformed market of the 21st century, R is appointed to her capacity at Puma as creative director of womenswear and global ambassador. The fulfilment of her desire to take creative

control of the product she would be associated with was deemed controversial for her lack of expertise as a designer. Would there be revolt? An ambassadorial role made sense for a market that lacks consumer unifying female sports stars, and R's projection of "body confidence, bravery and determination" through her career aligned with the named qualities of Puma. Their global brand and marketing director Adam Petrick notes that R's role is to lead the concept, ideas, overall direction, not to deal with all the details.⁴ What revolution is possible without appropriation of history and resources? Will labour conditions of the (factory) workers be improved when a name associated with empowerment is added to the label?

R's body on this runway is a mass of consistent perforations breaking up the dull pink folds of her monochromatic look. The shock of heavy fabric swaddling her body, draped from a tracksuit zipper but allowing athletic ventilation with the *broderie anglaise* – english lace – finish. Typified by multiple small cuttings inside embroidered holes, *broderie anglaise* is readily associated with Victorian fashion, though originating from Eastern Europe, named by the French, and used as a robust form of lacework, a lingerie ready for daily visibility. Calculated exposure. The tiny cut eyelets are unblinking and unrevealing of her body as she strolls the runway. The folds of her perforated tracksuit cape hang off a zipper, and have a Deleuzian quality, the interplay of interior and exterior, a non Euclidian geometry suggested in its hulking drape. Interior, exterior, her smiling procession is along a path that makes corners and folds through the salons of the Hotel Salomon de Rothschild. The runway path is laid like the garden maze of Versailles, entrapment for leisure. The maze walls are the bodies of live spectators. That is to say that chairs organise bodies into trapped views across a building run by the French government since 1922, bequeathed following the disinheriting of the jewess Helene de Rothschild for her marriage to a Roman Catholic. R chooses this mode of presentation for this collection with inspiration from what she has heard of Christian Dior's salon presentations of haute couture. Aiming for a modest contrast to the expected spectacle. This collaboration is a collision of corporate intent, inspirations wrung out to wave a new flag. R is

luminous and independent, a relatable and successful Black woman unrelenting in bringing the outside to inside, and in live streaming her fashion week presentation, making some effort to show an inside to the outside.

But from the outside, how inside does R seem? Puma is staked in the global consumer market, but R is also the first Black ambassador for Dior, spending extended time in Versailles to film a campaign.⁵ In a recent editorial in *CR Fashion Book*, R is portrayed as Marie Antoinette herself. To what depth can this comparison be drawn – why not another fashion icon of regal status – or are there no unifying examples in the market? Portraying R as a foreign queen whose downfall might lead to a period of rapid societal change? Is that another misattribution of role? *CR* is named after the influential fashion editor Carine Roitfeld, who explains in a promotional article that “I wanted to show that she is not just a villain to be despised or a muse to be channelled. She is neither. She is a prototype for contemporary fame, body, beauty, celebrity, and femininity. Everything done by her and to her has influenced society’s concept of womanhood, for better or worse.”⁶ The other justifications given in the article hinge on the authenticity that is recognised in her mediated conduct, her unapologetic behaviour. The runway is a space for a brand’s prototype – how their goods are styled – before they are distributed to punters. Is R’s consent (as a recording artist who has other responsibilities as creative director or ambassador) with this portrayal calculated to perpetuate her vulnerability and openness to being made a symbol with shifting image, an every-woman, or should the reader instead accept her as a monarch and a ruler, divine in rights? If she is an image, who has made her?

The clumsy-casual drape of perforated tracksuiting continues along the predetermined maze path, a scalloped edge dragging on the floor as she pauses for photographs with guests. These photographs feature her face rather than the long wig tail that hangs past her waist. Framing her face is a pale folding fan, brand emblazoned across. Held aloft so the text remains oriented for an image, it flutters as a merchandised oriental nod. Is this a reference to the chinoiserie of court fashions, or taking advantage of

existing fan making factories in the region? Puma is well known for avoiding transparency in labour conditions by working with multiple factories.⁷ Could R's creative direction be influenced by the convenience of material production? Or does the coordinated pink stamp of Puma across this opened concertina, this folded fan, hold fast to its eager desire to learn the codes and manners of the court she plays in.

As R proceeds in politely co-ordinated heels, her palm is curled upon, the fan extends in place of her fingers, her digits. She's not complicit with codes of fan handling. It's just aloft, saying hey, hello with its lettering rather than other social niceties. At some point the lettering will disappear – when her back is turned, or when the fan folds neatly towards a compact prism. Branding marks forever. Can the thing of the fan hold any position in (or on the) court, or indeed, does it retain enough prestige to take up such a position in a wardrobe? At the pivot of the fan, its point, a long string of pearls emerge to loosely wrap around her wrist. Tightly wrapped around R's neck are more pearls. Pearls drawing the line of severance, a reference to Marie Antoinette and *The Addams Family*. Watching from a livestream as these photos of her front are taken, the gaze is drawn to R's rows of material signifiers at the neck and wrist, of unattainable luxury at the edges of the tracksuit blessed to be zipped on R's body.

Marie Antoinette going to the gym in her jewellery, there's the presumption that some signifier of prestige is retained. R states in an earlier interview: "Legit, I have been in the gym every day this week because I am not willing to give up my food. But I will sacrifice an hour for the gym."⁸ Time is readily sacrificed for the sake of the surface. So why wouldn't these acts of self maintenance need to be decorated, jewels perhaps for no observer but yourself, flexing and sweating in the mirror. Perhaps Rihanna is an oyster, secreting towards an exterior shell that is also her skeleton – the interior exterior. The pink tracksuit shell that covers her fleshy body as she sacrifices hours. Perhaps her secretions of sweat are empathic with the oysters, secreting around a transplanted graft placed by farmers into their shells. Scales of desirability and historic

covetability. Marie Antoinette's jewellery included pearls of prodigious quality in size and lustre which now sit in another arrangement, having been dissembled from the queen's setting for political safety. The most impressive specimens are to be displayed, coveted, interchangeable, restyled.

How much authenticity does the viewer need? Are the pearls authentic or a synthetic copy? For her procession through the human maze, R is watched by the members of industry who have come to spectate, but for the live streaming, she is subject to an editing director who must maintain the gaze of a distant fan as R greets colleagues and acquaintances. The authenticity of the 'pearl' is conveyed enough in the creamy colour and shape, in the reference image summoned that gestures at least to a class that is somehow high, even if not explicitly royal. As R continues, a figurehead, a signal, and a figure of power, perhaps we can switch the ice cream titled *Neapolitan* – Brown, Pink, and Cream, to *Napoleon* – conquering, penetrating, redistributing.

- 1 Black, Hannah (2016) *This is Crap*, in: Frieze Magazine, available online: <https://frieze.com/article/crap>.
- 2 *Funny Face* (1957) written by Leonard Gershe, directed by Stanley Donen.
- 3 Nnadi, Chioma (2016) *Fenty x Puma Fall RTW 2016* on: *vogue.com*, available online: <http://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/fall-2016-ready-to-wear/fenty-puma>.
- 4 Friedman, Vanessa (2014) *Puma explains its new creative director*, in: *The New York Times*, available online: <http://runway.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/12/17/puma-creative-director-rihanna/>.
- 5 Kilcooley-O'Halloran, Scarlett (2015) *WATCH: Rihanna for Dior Behind-the-scenes*, on: *vogue.co.uk*, available online: <http://www.vogue.co.uk/gallery/rihanna-dior-secret-garden-full-campaign-film-and-images>.
- 6 Seigel, Ray (2016) *A bad gal becomes a queen*, in: *CR Fashion Book* Issue 9, available online: <http://www.crfashionbook.com/book/rihanna-crfashionbook/>.
- 7 Rank a Brand (2017) *How Sustainable is Puma?*, available online: <https://rankabrand.org/sportswear-sports-shoes/PUMA>.
- 8 Robinson, Lisa (2015) *Rihanna in Cuba: the cover story*, in: *Vanity Fair*, available online: <http://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2015/10/rihanna-cover-cuba-annie-leibovitz>.



Colophon

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