

Case Report

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BEYOND THE CATWALK. DESIGNING FASHION SHOWS BETWEEN EPHEMERALITY AND RESPONSIBILITY

Para além da passerelle. Conceber desfiles de moda entre a efemeridade e a responsabilidade

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Methodology / Investigation / Writing

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ABSTRACT

Fashion shows have been the subject of increasing critical attention for their environmental and symbolic impact, resulting emblematic of the contradictions of contemporary spectacular capitalism. While originally they were functional moments for the presentation of seasonal collections, today they are configured as real artistic productions with a high consumption of resources, often organised in exotic or symbolic places, with a significant ecological footprint. However, since the Covid-19 pandemic, there has been an intensification of reflection on the organisational methods and transformative potential of these events. This article analyses three emerging approaches that show concrete attempts to reconfigure fashion shows in an ecological and sustainable way: the use of nature as a performative setting, the aestheticisation of waste and the promotion of circularity. Through the critical analysis of case studies – from the fashion shows immersed in nature by Marine Serre and Jacquemus, to the use of recycled materials by Marni and Diesel, to the reuse and conscious design policies promoted by Bureau Betak, Prada and Spazio Meta – both the expressive potential and the structural limits of these practices are highlighted. In particular, the article emphasises how the sustainability of fashion shows cannot be addressed only as a technical issue, but implies a cultural, aesthetic and political rethinking of the very role of fashion within contemporary society. Fashion shows thus become not only brand communication tools, but also performative spaces in which new relationships between creativity, environment and cultural production are negotiated.

KEYWORDS

Fashion shows; Ecodesign; Circular Practices; Responsibility; Ephemeral Events.

RESUMO

Os desfiles de moda têm sido alvo de uma atenção crítica crescente pelo seu impacto ambiental e simbólico, tornando-se emblemáticos das contradições do capitalismo espetacular contemporâneo. Se originalmente constituíam momentos funcionais de apresentação de coleções sazonais, hoje assumem a forma de verdadeiras produções artísticas com um elevado consumo de recursos, muitas vezes organizados em locais exóticos ou simbólicos, com uma pegada ecológica significativa. No entanto, desde a pandemia de Covid-19, intensificou-se a reflexão sobre a forma como estes eventos são organizados e o seu potencial transformador. O artigo analisa três abordagens emergentes que revelam tentativas concretas de reconfigurar os desfiles de moda de forma ecológica e sustentável: a utilização da natureza como cenário performativo, a estetização dos resíduos e a promoção da circularidade. Através da análise crítica de estudos de caso – desde os desfiles imersos na natureza da Marine Serre e da Jacquemus, passando pela utilização de materiais reciclados da Marni e da Diesel, até às políticas de reutilização e design consciente promovidas pelo Bureau Betak, Prada e Spazio Meta – são evidenciadas as potencialidades expressivas e os limites estruturais destas práticas. Em particular, o artigo sublinha como a sustentabilidade dos desfiles de moda não pode ser abordada apenas como uma questão técnica, mas implica um repensar cultural, estético e político do próprio papel da moda na sociedade contemporânea. Os desfiles de moda tornam-se assim não só instrumentos de comunicação das marcas, mas também espaços performativos onde se negociam novas relações entre criatividade, ambiente e produção cultural.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Desfiles de moda; Ecodesign; Práticas circulares; Responsabilidade; Eventos efêmeros.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, sustainability has become an increasingly central concern within the fashion industry, influencing not only the selection of materials and production processes but also fashion shows and temporary events, key moments in brand communication. Traditionally conceived as ephemeral spectacles, fashion shows have often been characterised by elaborate staging and intensive resource consumption, despite their limited duration and considerable environmental impact. Until recently, industry attention focused almost exclusively on their visual and symbolic dimensions, largely overlooking their ecological consequences. However, a growing awareness of environmental issues – fueled by public pressure and emerging international regulations – has compelled many brands to reconsider how fashion shows are conceived, produced, and executed. Fashion shows have played a key role in the development of the modern fashion industry, which, as Gilles Lipovetsky argues in *L'Empire de l'éphémère*, has evolved into a mass consumption phenomenon shaped by the aesthetics of the ephemeral (Lipovetsky, 1987). During the 20th century, fashion shows were organised in department stores and fashion houses, with models walking through the rooms of the ateliers to present the collections to customers. From the 1960s, fashion shows began to move outdoors, occupying temporary spaces that were specially built and set up, where the value of the scenic context became just as important as that of the collections presented. The concept of the collection, in fact, finds its own interpretation in the space in which it is shown, with a growing connection between the scenography and the content of the show (Skov et al., 2009).

Although these events are conceived as ephemeral moments, they have a considerable impact from an immaterial point of view – of image and communication – but also from a material point of view, due to the huge consumption of resources necessary for the realisation of scenographies that, after a few minutes of use, are transformed into waste to be disposed of. Faced with these critical issues, significant questions have emerged in recent years that have stimulated the first examples of greater attention and responsibility in the design of these events.

This paper aims to analyse the role of design in the transition to more sustainable fashion shows, identifying and investigating three emerging approaches that are redefining fashion shows in the 21st century: 1) the shift of fashion shows from artificial architectural spaces to natural contexts, highlighting – also on a symbolic level – the attempt to re-establish a harmonious relationship between fashion and the environment; 2) the use of waste materials, both from previous fashion shows and from the sector's production processes, to promote a reduction in the consumption of resources; 3) the design of fashion shows according to the principles of eco-design, in order to minimise their environmental impact.

From a methodological point of view, the research adopts a qualitative approach, aimed at exploring in depth the emerging design strategies for sustainability in fashion shows. For each of the three approaches identified, representative case studies were selected based on their innovative relevance, media visibility and available documentation. The analysis is conducted through: a) desk research: collection and critical review of secondary materials such as scientific articles, industry reports, press releases and content from specialised media; b) visual analysis: systematic examination of the scenography and design elements through photographs, official videos and visual materials released by brands or press, with the aim of identifying design solutions. Furthermore, for one of the selected cases – Spazio Meta – for which there was insufficient online material available, an email interview was conducted with one of the founders to gain a deeper understanding of the processes and methodologies followed. It was decided not to proceed with interviews for the other cases as well, since, being luxury brands, it would not have been possible to obtain information other than that already reported in official communications.

The integration of these methods of investigation allows us to construct a complex and critical framework of the sustainable practices adopted in contemporary fashion shows, offering food for thought for theoretical reflection and for the definition of future guidelines in the sector.

2. THE GLOBAL IMPACT OF FASHION SHOWS

Fashion shows are closely entwined with the spectacular dimension of contemporary capitalism, as emphasised by Caroline Evans (2001). The rise of fashion models and runway events paralleled mass production during industrialisation. When haute couture houses began presenting garments on live models at the beginning of the 20th century, these figures mirrored the mannequins in department store windows, underscoring a deep interconnection between fashion and consumer culture (Evans, 2001: 272).

In recent decades, fashion shows have become a global phenomenon, with an increasing number of cities hosting fashion weeks, extending beyond the traditional four fashion capitals: New York, London, Paris, Milan (Potvin, 2009). This proliferation reflects what Lipovetsky and Serroy (2013) describe as the ‘aestheticization of the world’, in which capitalism produces an ‘aesthetic man’: a hyper-consumer who views the world through an aesthetic rather than utilitarian lens. In this context, beauty becomes a productive force, with no domain left untouched by aesthetic investment.

The expansion of occasions in which brands present their collections includes events dedicated to off-season collections, celebrations of anniversaries and special projects, such as Chanel’s *Métiers d’Art* fashion shows dedicated to artisan ateliers (Pinchera & Rinallo, 2021).

Concurrently, fashion shows are increasingly staged in symbolic or exotic locations outside traditional fashion hubs, aiming to reach strategic audiences and elevate brand prestige through unique settings or favourable economic agreements. Examples of this are the Dior Men’s F/W 2023 fashion show organised in front of the pyramids of Giza, Dolce & Gabbana Haute Couture 2021 fashion show in St Mark’s Square in Venice, and Chanel *Métiers d’Art* 2024/2025 fashion show in Hangzhou. This shift towards exotic or culturally charged contexts contributes to the spectacularisation of the fashion system, but also leads to a significant increase in the ecological footprint of these events. In fact, while on the one hand fashion shows are crucial tools for communication and for building the brand image, on the other hand they generate significant environmental impacts: international transport, temporary installations, non-recyclable materials and little attention to circularity are recurring elements.

In addition to their commercial function, fashion shows have become events with a high media and symbolic impact, capable of capturing global interest and influencing cultural perceptions of fashion. They have been called ‘the greatest show on earth’ (Duggan, 2001), an ‘enchanted spectacle’ (Evans, 2001). According to Ferrero-Regis and Lindquist (2020, p.1), the fashion show is ‘a moving spectacle that must constantly find new and alluring ways to present fashion, in alternative spaces, outdoors, readymade’. While originally they were simply biannual presentations of collections, today they are elaborate artistic productions, in which the designer has taken on the role of creative director who directs every aspect of the brand’s communication (SanMiguel, Rus-Navas & Sádaba, 2023). Yet, amid increasing environmental awareness and heightened social and regulatory expectations, some fashion houses are beginning to reassess the sustainability of these formats (Wang, Murphy & Christie, 2025), seeking methods to merge creative expression with environmental responsibility.

Emerging in response are innovative practices that reconcile spectacle with sustainability. This article identifies three primary design approaches: 1) utilising natural environments instead of artificial backdrops; 2) repurposing waste materials from fashion cycles or prior events; and 3) incorporating ecodesign principles into set construction. These approaches not only offer concrete solutions to reduce the environmental impact of fashion shows,

but also suggest a possible evolution of the language of fashion towards a new ethic of spectacularity.

3. SETTING IN NATURE

One way to rethink the fashion show format is by following the example of certain brands that relocate their presentations to natural environments. In these cases, nature is not brought into an artificial space; rather, it becomes the setting itself, replacing traditional indoor venues.

A particularly notable example is Marine Serre's *Marée Noir* Spring/Summer 2020 collection. The runway, constructed from black PVC, was installed on the grounds of a racetrack and traversed a garden of wild plants. This scenographic choice underscores fashion's impact on the environment, symbolising how human activity encroaches upon and disrupts the natural world. Serre – one of the most vocal designers on the issue of sustainability in contemporary fashion – has explicitly articulated her concern about the state of the planet and the precariousness of its future: 'The apocalypse is now, we are in the middle of it. We have no choice but to adapt to violent climate change and political uncertainty, to look at what is already there and what we have created, and work out new ways to live' (Davidson, 2019). In this context, the fashion show becomes a medium for articulating an apocalyptic vision and a call to urgent change (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1
Marine Serre, *Marée Noir*
spring/summer 2020 fashion
show.

In contrast, other cases aim to convey a more positive vision, a possible balance between fashion and nature. Artist Doug Aitken created *Green Lens* for the Saint Laurent Spring/Summer 2022 fashion show: an installation comprising earth, potted plants, and mirrors, situated on the island of Certosa in Venice (Vaccari & Franzo, 2021). Aitken described the work as a 'total art space' intended for walking and contemplation, where the presence of real vegetation fosters awareness of our surroundings and the need to re-establish harmony with an environment long damaged by human intervention. The installation serves as a tangible gesture suggesting that the restoration of human–nature relations often emerges from within the artificial and industrial domains of contemporary life. Similarly, French designer Simon Porte Jacquemus has integrated nature into the fashion shows of his eponymous brand. Notably, *Le Coup de Soleil*, presented in a lavender field in Provence for the S/S 2020 collection, and *L'Amour*, staged in a wheat field outside

Paris, exemplify this approach. In both instances, the runway was seamlessly laid across the landscape, without additional artificial elements disrupting the setting. These choices reinforced the imagery of rural France and a life in symbiosis with nature – values that are central to the brand's identity (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2
Jacquemus, L'Amour, spring/
summer 2021 fashion show.

Although divergent in aesthetic and scenographic intent, these examples demonstrate that situating fashion shows within natural environments can serve both communicative and design functions. In Serre's case, the natural setting is not idealised but problematised: the friction between the synthetic catwalk and untamed vegetation foregrounds the tension between culture and ecology, transforming the show into a space for critical reflection on planetary futures. In contrast, Saint Laurent and Jacquemus propose a more harmonious dialogue with nature, evoking rootedness, tranquility, and environmental beauty.

However, such practices invite scrutiny regarding their actual sustainability. The environmental costs of transporting people and materials, as well as potential disruptions to the landscape, raise the question of whether nature is genuinely respected or merely aestheticised. The risk is that nature becomes another scenographic asset, instrumentalised for brand storytelling. Therefore, while these initiatives reflect a growing ecological awareness within the fashion industry, they also expose the contradictions of a system still driven by spectacle and visibility. Employing nature as a stage may represent an initial gesture of engagement, but it must be accompanied by a deeper commitment to addressing the environmental consequences of ephemeral event production.

4. TAKING WASTE TO THE CATWALK

A second approach to reimagining the identity of contemporary fashion shows and conveying a message of change lies in the decision by some designers to valorise fashion waste and bring it to the stage.

This strategy is part of a broader process of aestheticising waste that has gained prominence in recent years (Binotto & Payne, 2017). Contrary to the previously dominant narrative –

where waste was viewed as a pollutant and a symbol of consumerism and overproduction – a more constructive perspective has emerged over the past decade. In this view, waste is reimagined as a potential material resource, with the designer assuming the role of an alchemist, capable of transforming discarded elements into new creations. This process introduces a poetic dimension to fashion practice: an aesthetic of the used and the discarded, in which waste is not hidden but celebrated (Franzo & Salomè, 2025). As Binotto and Payne (2017, p. 7) observe, ‘waste, in its material form, is expressive. Its presence can disrupt and provoke, particularly when it appears out of place. Thus, the poetic and aesthetic disposition of trash has the potential for meaningful engagement with the world.’

One of the earliest and most striking examples of bringing waste onto the runway is Alexander McQueen’s Horn of Plenty Autumn/Winter 2009 collection. Staged at the Palais Omnisports de Paris-Bercy, the show featured a shattered glass runway surrounded by a heap of repurposed props from the brand’s past collections, all painted black. Among these, one could identify carousel horses from *What a Merry-Go-Round* (F/W 2001), the chandelier from *Sarabande* (S/S 2007), and a branch from the tree in *The Girl Who Lived in the Tree* (F/W 2008) (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3

Alexander McQueen, *Horn of Plenty*, autumn/winter 2009 fashion show, ph: Joseph Bennet.

A more recent case is Marni’s Spring/Summer 2020 show, launched in tandem with the 2019 Global Climate Strike. Creative director Francesco Risso devised a two-part project. The men’s show, in June 2019, evoked a haunting underwater world, with attendees gazing through the surface of the ocean into a realm clogged with refuse – plastic bottles collected by the Marni team. These same bottles were later repurposed for the women’s show in September, in a scenography developed with artist Judith Hopf. The resulting environment resembled a whimsical jungle, filled with childlike trees bearing hand-painted bark and comic-strip-style leaves, set inside a vast industrial space. A third example is Diesel’s Spring/Summer 2025 collection, for which the set was constructed using 14,800 kg of denim scraps (Diesel, 2025). These were arranged to simulate a natural landscape, complete with trees and grassy textures. In the press release, the Vicenza-based brand declared its commitment to circularity, stating that the show ‘was created to highlight the beauty of waste and the commitment to finding synergistic ways to reuse materials’ (Fig. 4).

Unlike the previous examples – where the waste materials did not originate from fashion production processes (in McQueen’s case, leftover show props; in Marni’s, plastic pollution) – Diesel’s installation served as a direct commentary on the reuse of pre-consumer waste from the fashion manufacturing chain. As creative director Glenn Martens stated, ‘we are pushing for circularity in our production as much as we are pushing for the elevation of design.’



Fig. 4
Diesel, spring/summer 2025
fashion show.

The analysis of these examples reveals how the use of waste in fashion shows operates as a powerful symbolic tool that challenges the linear logic of production and consumption. McQueen stages a dramatic critique of excess and fashion history, Marni juxtaposes beauty and pollution to provoke reflection, while Diesel positions waste as a central resource in a vision of industrial circularity.

Nonetheless, these practices raise important questions. The aestheticisation of waste risks neutralising its critical charge, reducing it to a narrative device rather than a catalyst for structural transformation. Moreover, the actual environmental impact of these scenographies is rarely assessed, and their potential for systemic change remains limited if they are not embedded in broader reforms. To move beyond symbolic gestures, such scenographic strategies must be supported by a genuine commitment to sustainable design principles and circular business models. Only then can design function not merely as aesthetic mediation, but as a transformative instrument for reconfiguring value around what is conventionally discarded.

5. CIRCULARITY OF FASHION SHOWS

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, which temporarily halted fashion weeks and amplified critical voices, there has been a marked acceleration in efforts to rethink the fashion system as a whole – including the format and impact of fashion shows.

A noteworthy example is the Copenhagen Fashion Week, which in January 2023 introduced binding sustainability criteria for participating brands. These include commitments to zero-waste events and the reuse of scenographic elements (Copenhagen Fashion Week, 2024). Each brand must sign a self-assessment form pledging, among other things, not to use disposable items and to ensure that materials used in the show are given a second life. Already in 2019, the Fédération de la Haute Couture et de la Mode had introduced eco-design tools for Paris Fashion Week, although without enforcing compliance.

In addition to these institutional initiatives, important signals have come from Bureau Betak, one of the world's most prominent fashion show production companies, responsible for over 100 events annually. In February 2020, the company published its *Ten Commandments*, a list of sustainability guidelines aimed at reducing the environmental footprint of fashion show production. This manifesto was updated and made open-source in 2023. The S/S 2020 fashion show by Jacquemus – produced by Bureau Betak and mentioned previously – played a key role in shaping this commitment. Founder Alexandre de Betak reflected on how *Le Coup De Soleil* had minimal impact due to its use of natural sunlight, foldable chairs that were easy to transport, and a predominantly local guest list from Paris, significantly reducing travel-related emissions (Kent, 2020).

As outlined in their manifesto, Bureau Betak (2023) aims to consider every aspect of production through a sustainability lens. The studio advocates for a conscious design approach – as opposed to a traditional, human-centred one – that integrates creativity, functionality, and environmental responsibility. Conscious design means anticipating the future, favouring durable, repairable, and reusable materials. A particularly illustrative example involves the spectator stands, which were traditionally built from scratch for each show. Bureau Betak commissioned one of its partners to create modular, multi-level seating systems that could be customised, easily assembled, and finished with a range of coverings (carpet, wood, or fabric). These new structures are stackable, space-efficient, and significantly reduce material waste and setup time.

The growing emphasis on sustainability among both fashion week organisers and production studios has also influenced brands. One such initiative is Re-Set, launched by Prada in 2020. The project grants students and professionals access to raw and semi-finished materials that can be reused for educational or creative purposes. The video *Faux Fur: An Upcycling Project*, published on Prada's Instagram profile on 7 January 2022, documents a collaboration with students from the Design Academy Eindhoven and the Royal Academy of Art, The Hague (Prada, 2022). The video follows the journey of set materials from Prada's F/W 2021 show – designed by Rem Koolhaas's architecture firm OMA – through their transformation in a student-led creative process. The structure of the video is divided into clear phases: collect; size; shipment; recovery and reuse; the creative process (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5
Prada, *Faux Fur: an upcycling project*, 2022.

The increased focus on circularity in show production has also led to the emergence of companies specialising in the recovery and reuse of materials from ephemeral installations. One pioneering example in Italy is Spazio Meta. This company collects raw materials, semi-finished and finished scenographic elements from fashion shows and installations, processes and catalogues them, and sells them to the public – priced per kilogram or per item – with particular attention to the needs of the artistic community (Fig. 6). Spazio Meta also offers workshops and training activities in collaboration with artists and designers, aiming to raise public awareness and promote conscious recycling practices.

However, as revealed in an interview conducted by the author with Margherita Crespi, co-founder of Spazio Meta, several logistical and cultural obstacles persist. Many brands remain reluctant to reuse materials produced by others due to concerns over brand image and creative control. Furthermore, sustainability departments tend to focus on production rather than event-related activities (Crespi, 2025).



Fig. 6
Spazio Meta

Designing fashion shows with disassembly and reuse in mind requires abandoning adhesives in favour of mechanical fixings, opting for traceable and lightweight materials, prioritising rental over purchase, and enhancing dismantling and logistics strategies. Currently, Spazio Meta's primary clients are small or emerging brands with limited budgets. The company's long-term goal is to scale up material recovery and eventually align suppliers and clients in a fully circular loop.

A critical examination of these initiatives reveals a partial yet meaningful shift from linear to circular production models in the fashion show ecosystem. Efforts like those of Copenhagen Fashion Week and Bureau Betak mark a growing commitment to waste reduction and resource efficiency. Nonetheless, in an industry still driven by rapid consumption and aesthetic novelty, these initiatives often remain isolated or symbolic.

Circular strategies and upcycling are primarily adopted by emerging designers or brands with explicit sustainability goals. Wider adoption is limited by a pervasive reluctance to relinquish creative control and by systemic inertia. As the case of Spazio Meta highlights, the recovery of scenographic materials remains a fragmented effort, often hampered by organisational and perceptual barriers.

To transcend symbolic gestures, circularity must be embedded across the entire production cycle – from initial concept to post-event dismantling – requiring a radical reorientation of industry priorities. While current initiatives suggest an encouraging trajectory, substantive transformation depends on integrating circular principles into the structural and operational frameworks of the fashion system.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

Fashion shows are today at the centre of a wider reflection on the environmental responsibility of the sector. Despite their ephemeral nature, these events represent an important testing ground for imagining new models, in which aesthetic impact does not exclude an ethical and sustainable commitment.

The cases analysed show how it is possible to combine the spectacular dimension of fashion shows with more conscious practices: from harmonious integration with nature, to the creative use of waste, to the adoption of principles of ecodesign and circularity principles. Yet, such examples – while promising – still operate within a fashion system whose foundational structures remain largely unsustainable. The risk of greenwashing persists, as these initiatives may serve more as symbolic gestures than as systemic shifts. Nonetheless, the communicative power of fashion can play a strategic role in normalising sustainable values and aesthetics. To ensure these practices evolve from isolated cases to industry-wide standards, a collective effort is needed: brands are called to rethink their visual narratives and production models;

event producers must be encouraged to adopt reusable and low-impact scenographies; and institutions can foster this transition through supportive policies and regulatory frameworks. Moreover, to move beyond intention and rhetoric, the environmental impact of fashion shows must be more transparently assessed. Measurement frameworks – such as ISO 20121 for sustainable event management – can help quantify benefits (e.g., CO₂ savings, waste reduction) and promote accountability. Integrating such standards can support the credibility of sustainable fashion events and guide future innovations.

Design, as a discipline oriented towards the transformation of the present, can play a key role in this transition, helping to imagine new aesthetics and operating methods for a more sustainable fashion, not only in the products, but also in its symbolic rituals.

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