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## Fashion and Freud: A Psychoanalytic Analysis of Gucci's Spring Summer 2020 Show

### INTRODUCTION

Since Alessandro Michele's appointment as Creative Director in 2015, Gucci has risen from a heritage brand renowned only by fashion's elite to a household name. *Everyone* knows Gucci. The brand has become synonymous with pop culture as some of the most influential celebrities of our time like Harry Styles, Travis Scott, A\$AP Rocky, Florence Welch, and Beyonce wear Gucci on an almost-daily basis. Even the phrase "That's Gucci"—defined by Urban Dictionary as "a versatile slang term based on the luxury fashion brand meaning okay/good/great/awesome/fresh" (Urban Dictionary)—has infiltrated our vocabulary. And, thanks to the monkey-see-monkey-do work ethic of the fast fashion industry, a Gucci-inspired piece can be on Zara shelves and then in our wardrobes just six weeks after the original look makes its catwalk debut. Walk down Michigan Avenue and it will seem like every store has some variation of patch-covered white sneakers or embroidered handbags, only further proving that Gucci is everywhere.

So, as fashion month comes to a close and it becomes time to analyze the collections, Gucci seems like a good place to start.

In his Spring Summer 202 collection, titled "Orgasmique," Michele stepped away from the more-is-more aesthetic he has spent the past five years establishing. An eerie opening presentation of 60 models in straightjackets gave way to a collection rooted in tailoring, bold colors, and an unprecedented emphasis on black. It lacked the usual loud prints and aggressive accessorizing Michele is known for. Yet, as the title of the collection infers, there was no

shortage of references to sex. However, these references were not at all reminiscent of the house's early 2000's Tom Ford era that often comes to mind when one thinks of the words 'sexy' and 'Gucci' in the same sentence. Rather they were Michele's own interpretation, an interpretation that aligns remarkably with some of Sigmund Freud's most well-known theories. All in all, "Gucci Orgasmique" left viewers with a lot to unpack and must be analyzed through a psychoanalytic lens.

### ANALYSIS

As stated in the text, "psychoanalysis begins with a consideration of how the mind registers the body's internal, biological needs...and transforms them into motivating forces, or drives" (Ott 163). Drives, the key differentiator between psychoanalytic theory and all other theories of psychology, were clearly present in the Gucci Spring/Summer 2020 collection. Specifically, the two drives Freud identified as basic to human motivation, the death drive and the sexual drive, were present in the two separate segments of the show.

In the opening moments of the show, the red lights of the Gucci Hub flickered to a blinding white as models strapped into various versions of beige straightjackets made their debut, moving only because of the conveyor belt beneath them. Their lifeless expressions coupled with the clinical show space and the elephant in the room (the straightjackets) left an unnerving feeling in the pit of viewers' stomachs. Michele was highly criticized for the show's opening resulting in Gucci releasing a statement that identified the straight jackets as,

"the most extreme version of a uniform dictated by society and those who control it.

[Alessandro Michele] designed these blank-styled clothes to represent how, through fashion, power is exercised over life to eliminate self-expression. This power prescribes social norms, classifying and curbing identity" (Gucci).

This curbing of identity reflects Freud's definition of Thanatos, the death drive. Freud argues that Thanatos pushes the individual away from others and from the living world (BOOK 166). While uniforms, according to Gucci's definition, bound and unite people through conformity rather than drive them away from each other, they display a death of the individual. Michele highlights the negative aspect of the fashion industry that enforces trends so heavily that it is almost as if our cultures have designated uniforms. Regardless of how questionable the decision to use straightjackets was, Michele uses fashion to show that death drive can propel human development by enabling one to reject the norms set by those in power and express themselves through individualism.

In the second half of the show the sexual drive, or Eros, was much more obvious. Both individualism (expressed through the previously mentioned presence of the death drive) and the innate human desire to connect with others and the world draw wearers to Gucci's clothing (Ott 166). Lacy slip dresses, sheer, plunging necklines and thigh-high patent boots allow the wearer to feel sexy and empower them to feel confident while possibly acting on their sexual drive.

The presence of the sexual drive, allows one to analyze this collection using the apparatus theory. While apparatus theory is typically used to analyze film, it is applicable to fashion shows as well. British Vogue quotes Michele as saying, "The role of designers is based upon their lives. When you go to a movie you see the gaze of the director. There's no difference between cinema and fashion. I'm using my imagination to reimagine fashion" (Madsen). In a collection that seems like the turning of a new leaf for the house, Michele uses both the physical pieces of clothing and the presentation of the collection to display his reimaged take on sexy Gucci.

Just as the apparatus theory claims that the "environment and machinery of the cinema activate a number of psychoanalytic motivations within spectators" (Ott 172) elements of the

fashion show's production do the same. The feelings provoked from the overhead lighting flashing from an ominous red to clinical white, the moving conveyor belts pushing models down the catwalk, and the sound of shattering lightbulbs as the second wave of the collection entered the space enhanced the meaning Michele attempted to convey through his collection.

The Spring Summer 2020 collection is arguably Michele's sexiest to date, yet it was sexy without being overtly so. There was a perverseness in the unexpected elements of the collection—like straggly placed cutouts and false eyelashes tangled into models' eyebrows—that was surprisingly pleasing. Everything about it felt all wrong but at the same time, completely right. The strange sense of pleasure one felt from witnessing Michele's atypical definition of sexy walk the runway is scopophilia or according to Freud, the sexual drive manifesting (Ott 174). But there were also overt references to sex in the collection. After all, bags and pant legs were embroidered with the word 'Orgasmique.' Sheer lace slip dresses paired with patent leather chockers, whips and crops held as accessories, and even a logo-embellished pillow backpack presumably for late-night rendezvous embraced fetishes of all kinds. However, for those that watch the show because it brings them a great sense of pleasure, isn't fashion itself some sort fetish?

For Michele, who himself seems very familiar with Freud's definitions of scopophilia and fetishism, it is. He is quoted in *British Vogue* as saying, "The fashion show is the only time you can have sex with something material you like. I wrote 'Orgasmique' on the bags because it's a short and strange and deep emotion. It's like going to the theatre. Either you're there; or you haven't seen it. You can't be told about a play" (Madsen). And for those of us who do not have coveted front row invitation and must watch via live stream? "You're a bit of a pervert

when you follow fashion” (Madsen) Michele adds. Clearly, a nod to Freud’s definition of voyeurism.

## CONCLUSION

So why exactly was this particular collection noteworthy? ‘Orgasmique’ could very well signify a departure from the aesthetic Alessandro Michele has spent years crafting during his time at Gucci. If Michele decides that gone are the days of hyper-maximalism, then the fashion world will likely follow suit. Fondly nicknamed ‘Jesus Christ Superstar’ by Vogue critic Anders Christian Madsen, Michele possesses power to influence the entire industry but that influence may be exactly what he was warning against through the uniformed opening of his Spring Summer 2020 show. Is the trend-focused, clone-like nature of the fashion industry something escapable or is the cycle of big name brands copying each other to offer consumers slightly different versions of the same idea endless? To Michele, using fashion as a vehicle for self-expression seems like the only way to break free. In his show notes he asks, “Can [fashion] offer itself as an instrument of resistance? Can it suggest experiential freedom, ability to transgress and disobey, emancipation and self-determination?” (Murray). Whether the fashion industry decides to answer that question with a yes and embrace the individuality Michele preaches or produce a slew of spin-offs of Gucci’s new atypically sexy aesthetic is something only time will tell.

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