

*Fashion is not a Sign: Reading P.R.A.D.A.
Theory-Fashion and Luxury Language*
by Olivia Kan-Sperling

For S/S 2021, Prada designed a collection of questions to accompany their ready-to-wear. The advertising campaign for that season, “Dialogues,” consists of a series of minimal diptychs. In print, these appear as two shots of a single model—one Prada outfit, one pensive face—split across two white pages and accessorized by two sentences of text in Prada’s black serif. The verso of the spread is an enigmatic question (“DO YOU THINK IN LANGUAGES OR IMAGES?”; “SHOULD WE SLOW DOWN OR SPEED UP?”); the recto, a simple injunction: “Answer at prada.com.” These open-ended questions might ask us to express a preference between a pair of vague alternatives or to define the difference between two concepts. All either implicitly or explicitly invite us, the reader, to reflect on our ways of thinking. According to a press release from Prada, the responses submitted to prada.com “will become components of the campaign’s continued rollout, vital parts of a dialogue that will continue.” Really these campaign questions are, of course, rhetorical ones, meant less to provide an avenue for us to tell Prada who *we* are, than for Prada to tell us who *it* is.

What, then, is Prada? Well, Prada might say, that’s the question! Branding is usually about sending a message; Prada, we learn, is an inquiry. Countless other Prada campaigns tell—or ask—us the same thing: one perfume is “an invitation to open new possibilities to play and question convention” that is (dis)embodied by the “ethereal” Candy, a digitally rendered “virtual muse” born

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S/S 2021 was the house’s first collaboration between Raf Simons and Miuccia Prada, and the collection bears both designers’ sartorial signatures: there’s Miuccia’s gray sweaters and trademark nylon, Raf’s streetwear silhouettes, as well as several subtle nods to previous collections by both designers (a black-and-white graphic from Simons S/S 2002 and a green-and-blue print from Prada S/S 1996 were both recycled here, as one blogger noted).⁰⁵ Prada likes to advertise itself as in a state of continuous “re-interpretation,” a tendency it shares with most luxury fashion houses—though many of its peers prefer a less discreet iconographic approach. At Gucci, the bamboo-handled bag called “Diana,” originally released in 1991, is “reimagined with neon leather belts,” illustrating “the narrative of evolution and reinvention that runs through Gucci’s designs.”⁰⁶ The archetypal “Miss Dior” is regularly reincarnated in a fresh face (currently: Natalie Portman in the West, BLACKPINK’s Jisoo in the East) and stale 1950s frock. Prada’s recent “Symbole” handbag expresses this insistent recursion quite concisely: in a nicely fractalline visual tautology, the shape of the whole bag is inspired by the triangular logo that has marked their brand since 1919. These gestures towards historical continuity are not only reminders of each house’s storied past, they’re also meant to make us feel like each brand is the expression of a kind of personality or spirit, a person-like product we can pay to inhabit—each consumer a medium for the immortal Chloé, Céline, etc. Hence the renewed sense, each season, that a luxury fashion brand is a little like a deity undergoing psychoanalysis.

⁰⁵ unpublishedzine.com/fashion-beauty/
a-review-of-the-first-raf-simons-x-miuccia-prada-collection
⁰⁶ gucci.com/th/en_gb/st/capsule/diana-collection

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Prada Candy, 2011.
Image courtesy of Prada

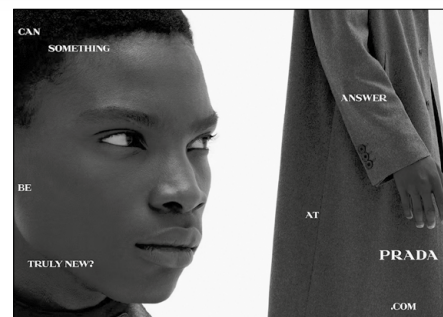


from the brand’s “DNA of curiosity” and “driven by a continuous quest to question.”⁰¹ The conventions being questioned are often equally ethereal: idealized dichotomies that are, as in “Dialogues,” proposed by Prada only to be dismantled in the same slogan. Their S/S 2022 collection “collided actuality and fantasy, the physical and the cerebral.”⁰² A series of pop-up stores manifests the brand’s “aesthetic codes” in an architectural style somewhere “between modernism and classicism, embellishment and purism.”⁰³ Prada-ness, we learn, is always emerging from this space of instability that both links and divides terms—what, in Pradaspeak, might be called a “Paradoxe,” the name of a perfume by Prada, embodied, this time, by Emma Watson, a woman “breaking the mold of the muse to be both in front of and behind the lens.”⁰⁴ Deconstruction, by whatever name, has never smelled so sweet.

⁰¹ prada.com/us/en/pradasphere/fragrances/
prada-candy/rethink-reality-prada-candy.html
⁰² prada.com/us/en/pradasphere/campaigns/
2022/ss-woman.html
⁰³ prada.com/us/en/pradasphere/special-projects/
2021/prada-glow.html
⁰⁴ youtube.com/watch?v=dzOqyG73KuE

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Prada Spring/Summer 2021 campaign
by Ferdinando Verderi. Courtesy of the
photographer and Prada.



But Prada’s self-interpretations read as especially neurotic, not least for their emphases on language. The S/S 2020 campaign, for example, revolved around a series of invented acronyms for “P.R.A.D.A.”—the name converted, here, into a potentially infinite set of sentences. What did Prada want to mean, by way of this solipsistic semiotic game, in the spring or summer of 2020? “People Rarely Accept Difficult Answers,” says one ad. “Pursue Randomness and Dichotomies, Always,” says another. Several models are filmed engaging in forms of play: deep in concentration, stacking a column of dice; hiding an orange under a paper cup; tugging on a rope. Play of signifiers, indeed!? Prada’s real message finds its medium neither in a triangle nor in a single, five-letter word, but in the linguistic pastime “P.R.A.D.A.” Consistently redundant, P.R.A.D.A. always uses five words where one would suffice, like a thesaurus-happy freshman trying to hit a word count. From the S/S 2020 campaign:

The multitude characterizes Prada, an ever-shifting landscape of meaning, endlessly reinterpreted... Like the identity of women today, the identity of Prada too is fluid, fluctuating, open to interpretation—confounding explanation, eschewing rhetoric, refuting definition. The paradox and contradiction

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inherent to Prada make easy categorization or summarization impossible: Prada is simultaneously complex and simple, singular yet multi-faceted...

There is a power to the word as a tool to define, and in Prada's case, to challenge definitions, to re-define, de-contextualize and recalibrate, to evoke an imaginary narrative and hence change our eye as we examine the picture plane. An attempt at an impossible definition becomes a manifesto for the impossibility of definition itself.

The Prada campaign evolves around a series of written acronyms, spelling out the word PRADA. Like the images they are placed alongside, each of these acronyms offers a possible interpretation of the idea of Prada, but only one of many. Ironic, surreal, ambivalent, dichotomic, these many attempts at definition ultimately only prove the indefinability of Prada as a single concept or idea.

Prada Spring/Summer 2021 campaign by Ferdinando Verderi. Courtesy of the photographer and Prada.



The prose style is a perfect example of what we've come to know as "International Art English," that bastardization of (mostly French, twentieth century) theory commonly found in art world press releases: an unedited moodboard of abstract nouns connected, technically if not

fashion, words are in: Dior, Fendi, Louis, and Gucci's bestsellers are plastered with typographical prints that abstract their brand names into illiterate patterns of interlocking initials. In the context of these ubiquitous condensations of language, P.R.A.D.A.'s acronymic expansions of its name read as almost subversive. As a 2018 *Vogue* article on logomania put it: "The written word is one of the most valuable commodities in fashion at the moment . . . logos have sold more clothes in the past couple years than any single trend."⁰⁹ In explicating this trend, the article goes on to quote graphic designer Mathias Augustyniak: "Now more than ever, clothes need to express their origin right away... To nurture a tridimensional language takes a lifetime." Apparently, fashion designers no longer have time to write in their own sartorial language, to create clothes that are recognizably their own, without the shorthand that is logocentrism. Or maybe it's that consumers no longer have time to read real fashion. Either way, according to *Vogue*, it's symptomatic of the speed of our society, phones, and social media.

An interesting example here is Gucci, whose recently-departed creative director Alessandro Michele was known for collections that combined a kaleidoscope of historical and cultural references—including theory—into a symbolically maximalist aesthetic that privileged story, character, and world-building. Michele, whose education included costume as well as fashion design, rejected the title of "creative director," preferring to think of himself as an "archaeologist" of garments.¹⁰ His Gucci show notes—texts distributed to audience members (like, crucially,

⁰⁹ [vogue.com/article/graphic-designers-logomania-trends-gucci-fendi-fall-2018](https://www.vogue.com/article/graphic-designers-logomania-trends-gucci-fendi-fall-2018)
¹⁰ [ft.com/content/e85a16b8-887a-11e9-b861-54ee436f9768](https://www.ft.com/content/e85a16b8-887a-11e9-b861-54ee436f9768)

sensibly, by commas.⁰⁷ Theory has a couple of diffusion lines in the realm of commodities; art and fashion are two of its most expensive down-market products. It's no coincidence, surely, that Prada has always been particularly proximate to the art world—Miuccia Prada's OMA-designed private museum in Milan is only one of countless collaborations with artists and architects.

It is obvious enough why a clothing company might align itself with art or theory: to spritz its all-too-worldly wares with the air of intellect. And it's easy to condemn the Prada Group's arts patronage as a cynical gesture that shows the total capture of art by capitalism. It is, perhaps, more interesting to consider the potential artfulness and intelligence of living fashionably. This is what Miuccia Prada asks us to do when she stages her models against monochrome backdrops that recall the blankness of gallery walls, or gives contemporary artists Elmgreen & Dragset shoes, handbags, and her permission to install a Prada storefront in the Texan desert as a "pop architectural land art project."⁰⁸ Similarly, instead of dismissing P.R.A.D.A. as an overwritten, under-thought theory knockoff, I would rather take seriously the specificity of this genre of language, this appropriation of theory-as-style. What does it mean to read Prada's texts on their own terms? What mode of reading does P.R.A.D.A. call for?

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Despite Prada's loquaciousness in their self-promotion, words almost never appear on the brand's clothing, shoes, and bags themselves. Everywhere else in luxury

⁰⁷ canopycanopycanopy.com/contents/international_art_english
⁰⁸ en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prada_Marfa#cite_note-Now-2

fashion journalists) before a runway presentation—were known for name-dropping buzzword-brand theorists—Baudrillard, Benjamin, Butler, Debord, Deleuze, Derrida—in a bibliographical logomania that mirrored Michele's visual citational practice. In addition to the classic double-G logo and the red-green Gucci stripe, under Michele, bags, belts, and tees were increasingly ornamented by a menagerie of visual emblems: bumblebees, snakes, tigers, and butterflies, each representing some aspect of the polyvalent "Gucci."¹¹ This inflation of the brand's symbolic economy correlated with skyrocketing sales; less than two years into Michele's tenure, Gucci saw its sharpest revenue increase in twenty years—49 percent.

Michele's passion for iconography extended to other kinds of statements as well: Gucci's 2020 Cruise collection, which included a purple jacket emblazoned with "My Body, My Choice" and a dress embroidered with a flowery pink uterus, is just one of many instances of fashion-world political signaling in recent years. Positions must be made legible, as must inspirations: Michele, for one, liked to present seasonal syllabi. The F/W 2018 collection, apparently a reference to feminist theorist Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto," was staged in an operating room and accessorized by prostheses.¹² The S/S 2020 collection, inspired by philosopher Michel Foucault, was set in a mental asylum and featured straitjackets, leather, and other "discipline and punish" gear. If, in Michele's designs, animals and colors became word-like—images flattened into hieroglyphs—the work of "theory" happened similarly: names and books found visually-encoded representation, like appliqué

¹¹ [gucci.com/us/en/st/stories/article/agenda_2016_issue04_gucci_garden_prefall](https://www.gucci.com/us/en/st/stories/article/agenda_2016_issue04_gucci_garden_prefall)
¹² [gucci.com/us/en/st/stories/runway/article/fall-winter-2018-details](https://www.gucci.com/us/en/st/stories/runway/article/fall-winter-2018-details)

patches (also beloved of Michele) advertising allegiances: Pro-Choice, Elizabeth II, Sonic Youth, Post-Structuralism.

Rather than transposing symbols culled from politics and other aesthetic spheres onto garments, Prada's language speaks in manipulations of material; the effects of the brand's products derive from their idiosyncratic articulations of qualities inherent to clothing. S/S 2023, for example, featured lingerie-like garments fused with outerwear. This "blurring of distinct realities," as the show notes put it, was achieved neither through a bricolage of subcultural signifiers, nor by, say, putting men in skirts. The realities being blurred were the functional and material features of garments themselves: a morning robe over a winter jacket. If that coat has *value*, it is reducible neither to its price tag nor to a "principle"—say, a statement on woman's role in the public realm—it is, like in painting, a question of shades and tones, the aesthetic impact of light and sheer with heavy and opaque.

Miuccia Prada, famously, could have gone into politics; instead, she chose fashion. She has often spoken of her interest in addressing contemporaneity, and her work engages many kinds of non-sartorial languages (film, art, architecture)—but these sources undergo a one-way translation, the unravelling of which isn't very P.R.A.D.A. at all. Her garments aren't statements; they're fashion: an elevation of both form and function, and of life itself.

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Miuccia Prada frequently insists that her work is not art. Nor is she an avant-garde designer: for a certain

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goes. The slogan seems to reference *In the Mood for Love* (2000), but there are otherwise no encodings of Wong Kar-wai's film: "Prada" becomes the signifier that can stand in for any word—in this case, "love" itself. The campaign is a beautiful riff on one of Don Draper's best aphorisms, "What you call love was invented by guys like me to sell nylons." An ad campaign is distinguished from a clothing catalog because it does not operate 1:1, with definitions or information, but with much more oblique strategies of making meaning—by routing desire through other objects, stories, and worlds. In this sense, P.R.A.D.A.'s insistence on instability of meaning is advertising in its purest—or, at least, in its most self-aware—form.



The question, then, becomes: what is it that P.R.A.D.A. is teaching us to desire?

It isn't Studio 54, Renaissance Italy, or punk music. If Gucci's campaigns are hyper-situational *mise-en-scenes* of garments, Prada's texts and images are floating signifiers, unmoored from context, much less "story" or "world." Let's return to our reading of the S/S 2020 ad copy above. It's a text that might have been written by a GPT trained

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class of consumer, Prada products pass as everyday wear.¹³ And this is, finally, how we must read Prada's ad language—as something wearable. Although the exhibition press release and Prada's theoryspeak blurbs are stylistically similar, the goods they advertise occupy fundamentally different dimensions of, well, "reality." Art is meant to be appreciated within the white-walled heterotopia of the gallery. Even once it has been sold into the space of a living room, the art object always brings its own backdrop; it appears in a kind of permanent vacuum, as a material manifestation of the critical distance that is both mimicked and engendered by the language that advertises it. But clothing, makeup, and perfume take place not only in our daily lives, but on our bodies. They confer an effect on our gestures, faces, gait—our entire character. The language used to advertise them, therefore, is less a critical language than a language to be lived in.



Or, rather, a language in which we are meant to dream of living in. If clothing contributes to character, advertising generates desire. P.R.A.D.A. is, of course, meant to put us "In the Mood for Prada," as the S/S 2022 campaign

¹³ [youtube.com/watch?v=kkEkYPOo1Zk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kkEkYPOo1Zk)

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on the totality of postmodern philosophy books. Although clearly evocative of "theory," there are no concrete citations here. In short, it *means* nothing. Removed from any real analytic context or specific philosopher's vocabulary, the statements have the dizzying quality of cleverly mimicking concepts, but communicating little. They preserve only the form—perhaps, the "aesthetic"—of theory, not its contents.

What this text—and all the acronymic expansions; empty signifiers we have encountered thus far—*do* betray is a love for writing in its purest form; for words in themselves, divorced from the information they might convey; for the texture of ideas; for the *style* of theory and the surface of its language. Rather than presenting us with a *Paradoxe*, Prada's a-signifying minimalism vis-à-vis clothing design actually helps us read the maximalism of their flowery written language. P.R.A.D.A. does not think in languages or in images, but writes in fabric. Rather than being merely redundant, the repetitions that embroider Prada's ad copy become sensorial, coalescing into something like a pattern. (Because P.R.A.D.A. always functions via a play on words, we might note that the S/S 2023 collection inverts this textural, textile-like ad copy by itself becoming paper: dresses are made from a paper-like fabric; sweaters are crumpled to resemble fine tissue paper; skirts are torn, as though out of a notebook; and bags are folded into neat, origami-like shapes.)

P.R.A.D.A. is language as and for luxury consumption; it figures theory as something that one can desire to live in, and therefore, of course, buy. What to make of this commodification, this materialization, of "theory" by a luxury brand? Surely one cannot *buy* the position of critique. But can one even wear it? The question reminds me

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of an old debate: over the piety produced in a girl—or not—by wearing a fine gold cross, for example; over the spirituality and sensuality destroyed or engendered by beautiful paintings of the Virgin. It returns us to the relationship between material, body, image, and thought. What is “thinking,” where does it come from, in what forms is it made available to perception? (You can’t buy knowledge, for sure, but what about the appetite for learning produced by the look of new paper and pencils, back to school shopping at Staples?) I love P.R.A.D.A. because it opens up these questions for me, the real questions of philosophy.

P.R.A.D.A., in other words, puts us in the mood for reading. By accessorizing, rather than merely explaining, fashion, its texts elevate both clothing *and* writing to the status of fetish object. The point of language isn’t merely to mean something, just as the point of a purse isn’t only to carry your keys—or to signal the wealth indexed by the logo stamped into its leather. Theory, like fashion, is an aesthetic, not merely a linguistic, form. Abstraction, like clothing, is a matrix for the infinite substitutions of desire as much as it is an everyday, livable, necessary human function. All of this is written in P.R.A.D.A., a language that shows that real reading is always interpretation: an experience in the form of a question. And perhaps, for some, the desire to question might—who knows?—be roused by a purse in Pocono nylon. “Perhaps Romance Always Desires Another,” as Prada once said. “Paradoxical Reactions Animate Daily Actions.” ×



Prada S/S 2020 campaign by Jamie Hawkesworth.
Courtesy of the photographer and Prada.

It was the thinness of her dress vacuuming itself to the front of her body; his marine trench rimming his calf, a young woman’s tugging trousers, then breasts moving freely; the stiff shirt shell-like sturdy from washing, and he surely dries it flat, and it smells, the fibers smell all separately and together, even more they hold the memory of being washed and the woman’s foulard that had touched her lover’s armpit and memorized it and she’s unsure if she likes that but her shoes high at the heels carry her and mark with sound her every step, they change her and someone else right behind unrelated but all here now, pulled up white socks and new shoes the feeling of new shoes and the way you present them presenting you and the way the garments add up but mostly the wrapping apron, the inside of legs stroking having their own little conversation *sh sh sh sh sh* and the little panties sneaking in between thighs and the sudden arousal and flat shoes’ soft soles and wearing panties, silk liner touching like underdresses, they used to wear those to make the dresses glide and hold a layer of heat and protect the dress from the skin’s detachables and skin pale white covered thick and dark beef red lips long trousers and bare knees.

Indoors now, her heels in the carpet in the dark—the body orienting itself drunkenly finding the light switch, lined skirt ribbing the smooth but finely-textured tights, the front of her foot pushing into the shoe as she bends forward, the smooth insole making the foot slip gripless aside from her breath in the room and the carpet absorbing her steps as if that too now became part of what she was wearing, padded, she felt padded, the skin touching the fabric where the belly stuck out, tucked fold pressing a trace into her skin no more bracing underwear now, but her mother’s pearls, yes, cold when they turned and her glasses heated by the nose, the edge of her jacket holding her hair in place. The earrings lean into the warm spot scented with bergamot, black pepper and ylang ylang, a deep, rich aroma with slightly sweet, earthy, green and floral notes. It elicits hints of custard, jasmine, banana, neroli (bitter orange), honey and spice. There the metal touches, their full weight sort of globes follow neatly curving, full they can’t really dangle like some earrings do they wobble alongside you but these stay put like I wish I would. Imagine these trousers lined. Have you read about the frequency of wool cotton and linen? ×