

Research proposal: A potential bridge between philosophy and haute couture

By: Lo Min Choong Julian | 18 April 2023 | Edited: 9 December 2023

Written for the partial completion of NTU's HY4015 Philosophical Methodologies

In this course, we were tasked with writing a research proposal, as the course's aim is focused on philosophical methodologies. This is my research proposal.

In this research project, I shall examine haute couture from a philosophical lens, specifically as an attempt to characterise the nature and properties of haute couture. Through this, I hope to expand on the resources philosophers have on fashion and to generate interest in the examination of haute couture.

Background

Fashion is vast and multidimensional. In order to examine the industry, one must focus on specific aspects of it.

One could consider pop culture's portrayal of the work culture, of which pop culture and interview stories have claimed to be toxic, cut-throat, and highly competitive (Finerman, 2006). One could consider the brand identities associated with fashion—it being luxurious, high class, and refined (Solomon et al., 2022). One could consider fashion as a social construct, as an object to distinguish one from one socio-economic status to another (Jacobson et al., 2018). One could examine the commercial implications of the industry, examining its ethical and environmental concerns (HBO, 2015). One could examine the news coverage of fashion, and ask what media messages the industry has been perpetuating (Janssen, 2016). One could ask what fashion is exactly, and examine the contemporary and historical landscape to arrive at an answer (Absolute Documentaries, 2022).

What constitutes fashion? How could we capture all its dimensions? How is haute couture different from other areas of fashion, such as fast fashion? Do we even have enough information about fashion to properly conduct philosophical investigations?

As fashion is a niche topic with a significant lack of examination, haute couture, a subset of fashion, is severely underexplored. Thus, through this research project, I shall attempt to bridge the gap between philosophy and haute couture. I shall attempt to explicate central problems with haute couture. In the process, I shall utilise frameworks and methods of philosophical inquiry. Thus, after the conclusion of this research project, we, then, can determine whether the resources of inquiry we have at our disposal are sufficient. If not, we then have the opportunity to develop and expand our inquiry capabilities. This allows us to expand the possible domains of inquiry, and to produce improved investigations in the future.

Pre-investigation, it should be noted that haute couture has recently made significant developments. Guo Pei (郭培) is the first Asian couturier to be "inaugurated as a member of the Trade Association of High Fashion in Paris" (Guo Pei, n.d.; Xinxian, 2016; Lim, 2019; Tamagno, 2022). This move alone has a multidimensional significance. First, it shows the progression of cultural inclusion within haute couture. Second, it explicates the power dynamics within haute couture—to be recognised in the eyes of haute couture, there is a formal, perhaps legal, procedure. Third, it highlights the domain of haute couture—it is not country-specific, it is cultural-specific. What more can we say beyond these initial reactions?

Research questions

As the philosophy of haute couture is underdeveloped, there are many possible central problems that can be explored. To better explicate the depth of the philosophy of haute couture, I shall state several potential central problems. The following are some central problems formulated as questions.

1. Definitions

- 1.1. What is haute couture?
 - 1.1.1. Definitions given by philosophers
 - 1.1.1.1. Analytical
 - 1.1.1.2. Phenomenological
 - 1.1.2. Definitions given by couturiers
 - 1.1.3. Definitions given by fashion editors
 - 1.1.4. Definitions given by fashion critiques
 - 1.1.5. Definitions given by observers
- 1.2. Do these definitions agree with each other?
- 1.3. What constitutes as a complete, or a well defined definition of haute couture?
- 1.4. Do we need multiple, or all of them for a complete definition?
- 1.5. What is fashion?
- 1.6. What is aesthetics?
2. What is haute couture's relation with
 - 2.1. Fashion
 - 2.2. Luxury
 - 2.3. Aesthetics
 - 2.4. Philosophy
 - 2.5. History
 - 2.5.1. Political
 - 2.5.2. Fashion
 - 2.5.3. Cultural
3. Do we need to have an understanding of aesthetics and aesthetic judgements in order to say something about haute couture?
4. What is peculiar to haute couture?

- 4.1. Is haute couture necessarily anthropocentric?
 - 4.1.1. If so, what are its philosophical implications?
 - 4.1.2. If not, can we extend haute couture to animals, aliens, objects?
 - 4.1.3. Should we extend haute couture beyond humans as subjects?
- 4.2. Is there an aesthetic judgement exclusive to haute couture?
- 4.3. Is there an aesthetic experience exclusive to haute couture?
- 4.4. Is the commercialisation of fashion hyper-realised in haute couture?
- 4.5. What sets haute couture apart from other disciplines of fashion?
5. What are the properties of haute couture?
 - 5.1. Is it physical, i.e. does it fit into the physical monism thesis?
 - 5.2. Is it an idea?
 - 5.3. Is it a social construct?
 - 5.4. Is it a product of the differentiation of social classes?
 - 5.5. Is it purely contained within clothes?
 - 5.6. Is it simply the reactions I get by observing it?
 - 5.7. Is it a process?
 - 5.8. Is it a pure, abstract concept?
 - 5.9. Can it be characterised by the sum of a whole system?
 - 5.10. Is it a reaction to the world around us?
 - 5.11. Is it a form of expression to some aesthetic prompt or problem?
 - 5.12. Is it a form of escapism?
6. Who determines the direction of haute couture?
 - 6.1. Does a person require permission to become a couturier?
 - 6.2. Are there standards of haute couture that need to be met to be counted as legitimate?

- 6.3. Who does the gatekeeping/evaluation?
- 6.4. Are these standards objective, arbitrary, legitimate?
7. How is haute couture...
 - 7.1. Temporally dynamic?
 - 7.2. Distinct between cultures?
 - 7.3. Distinct between brands?
 - 7.4. Distinct between designers?
 - 7.5. How can we demarcate the different practices and forms of haute couture?
8. What are haute couture's
 - 8.1. Aims? Is it...
 - 8.1.1. Knowledge?
 - 8.1.2. Innovation?
 - 8.1.3. Art?
 - 8.1.4. Money?
 - 8.1.5. Fame?
 - 8.1.6. Cultural significance, development?
 - 8.2. Desired outcomes?
 - 8.3. Actual outcomes?
 - 8.4. Ideal state?
 - 8.5. Is there a difference between its idealised outcomes and real-world outcomes?
9. How is haute couture possible What are its...
 - 9.1. Mechanics?
 - 9.2. Necessary conditions?
 - 9.3. Sufficient conditions?
10. Aesthetics

- 10.1. Is haute couture art?
- 10.2. Does it exist independently from people's perceptions?
11. Who is haute couture for...
 - 11.1. Couturiers?
 - 11.2. Designers?
 - 11.3. Fashion enthusiasts?
 - 11.4. Social elites?
 - 11.5. The rich?
12. Who is haute couture accessible to?
 - 12.1. Is it necessarily exclusive?
 - 12.2. What barriers to participation does haute couture have?
 - 12.3. Can haute couture be misappropriated?
13. Ethical dilemmas
 - 13.1. Is haute couture susceptible to the critiques brought against fast fashion?
Specifically, the ones where overconsumption is encouraged to an unsustainable degree, thus, leading to negative environmental impacts.
 - 13.2. Is haute couture susceptible to the critiques brought against fast fashion?
Specifically, the ones where manufacturers of the actual garments are done in sweatshops, in poor working conditions, for unlivable wages.
 - 13.3. Should we allow haute couture to exist if such ethical transgressions are in haute couture's system?
 - 13.4. What are the ethical costs of doing business in the haute couture landscape?
14. Inquiry-specific
 - 14.1. Do we have enough information about haute couture to conduct an inquiry?
 - 14.2. How do we properly investigate haute couture?

- 14.3. What methodologies and frameworks are sufficient for an investigation?
- 14.4. Who should we question in order to investigate haute couture?
- 14.5. Can we examine haute couture independently from people?
15. Should we investigate haute couture?
 - 15.1. Are there questions that are unanswerable in haute couture?
 - 15.2. Is there an ethics of haute couture?
 - 15.3. What form would an appropriate haute couture answer be...
 - 15.3.1. Verbal?
 - 15.3.2. Visual?
 - 15.3.3. In the form of clothing?

Evidently, there is much to cover. One research project cannot address it all. Thus, in this research project, I shall focus on the domain haute couture resides in, and investigate it by questioning those directly involved with the production process of haute couture. In terms of central problems, I shall focus on central problems (1), (4), and (11), simply because they are aligned with my personal interests, and because I believe these are the right questions to ask about haute couture, based purely on my intuitions.

However, this is not satisfying as a justification. I am allowed concession because there is a lack of investigation into haute couture to begin with. Thus, one can break ground wherever without much justification. In the future, perhaps, we will discover what may justify the investigation of central problems of haute couture under a theory.

It may be tempting to merge (1), (4) and (11) into a single central problem. It can be formulated as; "What is the fundamental nature of haute couture?". I would like to avoid framing haute couture in this manner because it feels wrong. (1) is an attempt to discover the domains of haute couture. Asking for the fundamental nature of haute couture is an attempt to discover the essence of haute couture, which is a worthwhile question. However, thinking

about the fundamental nature of haute couture in the first place shapes our approach dramatically. It asks a metaphysical question, which may or may not be the primary focus of aesthetics, fashion or haute couture. Thus, I shall avoid framing haute couture in such a manner.

Literature review

There is a severe lack of philosophical literature on fashion, let alone haute couture. Exactly how lacking remains a question to be answered.

First, we can begin with an encyclopaedic description of haute couture. Oxford's Encyclopedia of Aesthetics credits Charles Frederick Worth as "the founder of haute couture" (p. 8). Haute couture is defined as "a new French system whereby the design, construction, and embellishment of a woman's garment and its accessories would be undertaken as a single creation by a named artist" (p. 8). This definition is phrased as such because of the history of fashion. Historically, people were unaware of who designed and made clothes. The only thing people associated with clothes are the people who wore it, and not those who designed and made it.

As such, this definition, while true, may be outdated. We have seen a hundred years since Worth as the pioneer of haute couture. Now, we may understand haute couture differently, significantly so. Exactly how we understand it now is one of the key problems that will be addressed by this research proposal. How I shall update this definition is through phenomenological reduction, then description, before proceeding with analytical analysis.

Furthermore, who exactly should we credit the creation of haute couture? Certainly, Worth made their mark. However, is his mark more significant than Dior's revitalisation? Did haute couture change significantly so that Worth's haute couture is distinct from Dior's haute couture? Who we credit haute couture's creation is essential to where we demarcate the domain of haute couture. Furthermore, we will be able to trace who defined haute couture

through their individual actions, what dresses they designed, and what impact that had on the haute couture landscape.

Another problem is with the reference to France. One interpretation of this is that haute couture is exclusive to France. This interpretation fails because of Guo Pei's entrance. Therefore, nationality is not what is meant by "France". Another interpretation is that "French" refers to the culture of France, specifically France's idea of culture, art, and society. Exactly what France's "idea of culture, art, fashion, and society" is hard to pinpoint, especially since it relates to intangible, abstract ideas. Perhaps, haute couture is one answer to these vague notions.

A significant change is also introduced to haute couture because of Guo Pei's strides. She is Chinese, bringing with her Chinese (possibly Confucian) values. In her collection titled "1002 nights", she explicitly harmonises Chinese fashion styles with the French style. The intercultural manifestation suggests that haute couture is not just for the French, but for the Chinese, and beyond. How has Guo Pei influenced haute couture through this collection? How might we investigate the impact brought about by this collection?

What is interesting in Oxford's definition is the claim that haute couture has a "system". If it is indeed systematised, understood, and practised by contemporary couturiers, we might be able to extend formal analysis into haute couture. However, we may run into critical issues. What the system refers to are the conventions and processes of haute couture. For example, how do we characterise Fédération de la Haute Couture et de la Mode's place in the system? Are its functions and goals part of the system, or merely external influences on the system?

There is no doubt that the fashion shows during fashion week are part of the system. The format of the shows are potential points in which one can possibly influence the haute couture system. That is, one can change the show's duration, or location, number of dresses,

the day the show runs in the year, the number of designers per show, the spatial arrangement of the show, and how the show is differentiated from every other show. Exactly how much the shows make up in the system is a critical question. How the system is influenced by its parts is also a critical question.

To claim that the haute couture system is axiomatic, or formalistic, is premature. We should meet haute couture where it currently is, before even considering what it could be, and what its idealised form is. Or should we?

For the purposes of this research project, I shall limit myself to examining haute couture for what it is.

While there is a lack of literature on haute couture itself, we can bring in literature that is not about haute couture, but is nonetheless useful in our investigation. For example, in *A Philosophy of Luxury*, Lambert Wiesing argues that luxury is an aesthetic experience (Wiesing, 2019; Lo, 2022). It has necessary and sufficient qualifiers, e.g. luxury is necessarily ostentatious and luxury is sufficiently an experience. Wiesing argues luxury is a unique aesthetic experience because it is relative to one's perception and of its functionality.

Suppose haute couture is luxurious. Would Wiesing's arguments be applicable to haute couture? Is there something more peculiar with haute couture, even more so compared to the peculiarities of luxury? Is luxury necessarily anthropocentric? It does not seem to be the case. However, haute couture seems to be necessarily anthropocentric. After all, the primary and only subjects of haute couture are humans.

To claim haute couture is necessarily anthropocentric is problematic. While it is the case that only humans have been observed to engage in haute couture, it is not the case that it is exclusive to us. There is no capacity unique to humans that is necessary for haute couture to be engaged with. This is similar to the fact that rationality is not exclusive to humans, and that morality (deontology) is not just for humans, but for all rational agents, regardless of

one's species and one's biochemical make-up in which rationality is contained and arises from (Kant, 2019, pp. 95-6). Thus, to claim haute couture is exclusively anthropocentric is erroneous. To say that haute couture is an anthropocentric endeavour is accurate.

Weising demonstrates the power of phenomenology in the investigation of aesthetics. Thus, we can safely consider phenomenology as a suitable resource in our investigation into haute couture. Furthermore, it is promising as Weising has given a thorough examination into luxury, which indicates the potential for a rich investigation into haute couture.

This covers central problems (4) and (11).

Methodology

What are the steps I shall take in order to carry out my investigation into haute couture? In this section, I shall explicate the methods we have at our disposal. I shall also consider the challenges of using such methods in relation to haute couture. I am in favour of utilising both phenomenology and analytic philosophy for this investigation. Specifically, I would like to begin with phenomenological reduction, before proceeding with one or more phenomenological descriptions of haute couture, and then move into analytical philosophy.

My current goal in this research project is to address the following three central problems of haute couture:

- (1) Definitions: What is haute couture?
- (4) What is peculiar to haute couture?
- (11) Who is haute couture for?

Phenomenology is particularly suitable for (1). (4) and (11) requires a proper response to (1). This highlights phenomenology's significance within my investigation into haute couture. Phenomenology is also particularly suitable for this investigation because of the nature of aesthetics. There seems to be something particular about the experience of fashion that is almost indescribable, and uncapturable except through the experience of the

experience itself. We engage with haute couture because we are conscious of it. It is something we experience, more than just fabric on the body. Thus, phenomenology is suitable because it is able to isolate this experience and then capture it, making analysis possible.

To engage with phenomenology, one must pinpoint the subject of examination. This is troubling, and quite literally, a central problem. Do we pinpoint haute couture as the experience of haute couture? Or the system of haute couture? Or the production process? Or the show itself as a viewing experience? Or the format of the show, or all possible observations of the dresses at all angles, at all possible times?

The last question is tempting as a claim to the characterisation of haute couture, as we can simply employ Merleau-Ponty's object-horizon structure and conclude that haute couture is its dresses viewed from everywhere at once, forever (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 79). Unfortunately, there seems to be a disconnect between this description and what haute couture is. For example, haute couture could be the abstract object as described by Merleau-Ponty's object-horizon structure, or it could simply be the object that is physically and literally in front of us. Thus, claiming that haute couture is an abstract object might be the wrong way of approach. If we were able to enumerate why the object-horizon structure is wrong, we then grow closer to what haute couture is.

Phenomenological reduction is equally important as it removes our presuppositions about everything. Therefore, it allows us to properly investigate haute couture, free from bias. Thus, the employment of phenomenology will allow me to examine haute couture from an analytical perspective. I can then dive into the possible necessary and sufficient descriptions of haute couture, or say more about its metaphysical nature. Furthermore, then I would be able to point out the many links haute couture has that are peculiar to it.

Before any investigation should be done, one needs to settle the investigative aims. I have two worries. Both of which stem from the lack of information available about haute

couture in the first place. The first is whether one can safely determine the proper investigative aims of potential haute couture projects. The second is in the decidability of proper methodologies that allow one to meet such aims. What should the outcome of this investigation be? Should I be aiming for a theory of haute couture, one that describes its many aspects and a possible unity of aspects?

A worry I have is in deciding what methods of analysis I wish to use, I have presupposed the nature of haute couture. That is, to determine what is a suitable method of investigating haute couture, I must first know what haute couture is. I doubt this is a fatal problem, or a significant one. Theories of haute couture can be developed under this worry and still prove useful. An indication of a successful theory of haute couture may be one that addresses these worries. It will not only shed light on what investigative methods work, but also on haute couture itself.

References

- Absolute Documentaries (2022, January 6). *The History Of Christian Dior | Fashion Documentary* | Absolute Documentaries. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/pkKEOpJdvko>.
- Finerman, W. (Producer). (2016). *The Devil Wears Prada*. 20th Century Fox. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0458352/>.
- Guo Pei. (n.d.), *Guo Pei — Official website*. <https://www.guopei.com/>.
- HBO. (2015, April 27). *Fashion: Last Week Tonight with John Oliver (HBO)*. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/VdLf4fihP78>.
- Jacobson, N., Simpson, B., Penotti, J. (Producers). (2018). *Crazy Rich Asians*. Warner Bros. Pictures. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt3104988/>.
- Janssen, S. (2006). Fashion reporting in cross-national perspective 1955–2005. *Poetics* 34(6): pp. 383-406. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2006.10.001>.
- Kant, I. (2017). Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals. In Cahn, S. M. & Forcehimes, A. (Eds.), *Principles of Moral Philosophy: Classic and Contemporary Readings in Normative Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. ISBN: 9780190491000. <https://global.oup.com/ushe/product/principles-of-moral-philosophy-9780190491000>.
- Kelly, M. (2014). *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*. Oxford University Press. <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/acref/9780195113075.001.0001/acref-9780195113075;jsessionid=2BA328BCC30E610B7B6D3A9F7D3D9139>.
- Lo, J. (2022, November 11). *Luxury: What is it?*. Essay for CC00001.
- Lim, K. (2019, October 24). *The Chinese Designers Of Haute Couture*. Vogue Hong Kong. <https://www.voguehk.com/en/article/fashion/haute-couture-designers-china/>.
- Merleau-Ponty, M., (1962). *Phenomenology of Perception* (Smith, C., Trans.) New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul. (Original work published 1945). ISBN: 9780203994610. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203994610>.

Solomon, M., R., Mrad, M. (2022, July). *Fashion & Luxury Marketing*. SAGE Publications.

ISBN: 9781526419248.

<https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/fashion-luxury-marketing/book255328>.

Tamagno, B. (2022, July). *Get to Know Guo Pei, China's Queen of Couture, in New*

Documentary. Radium. <https://radii.co/article/guo-pei-documentary>.

Wiesing, L. (2019). *A Philosophy of Luxury* (N.A. Roth, Trans.). New York: Routledge.

(Original work published 2015). ISBN: 9780367138417.

<https://www.routledge.com/A-Philosophy-of-Luxury/Wiesing/p/book/9780367138417>

Xinxian (2016, April 22). *Guo Pei: Royal Court to Paris Catwalk*. Paris Cherie.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20160422101509/http://www.parischerie.com/34835/chinese-couturier-guo-pei-shows-during-paris-haute-couture/>.