

155 Everything is connected: the influences and inspirations of global icon, activist, and radical fashion philosopher, Vivienne Westwood

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Abstract

Fashion's foremost thinker, Vivienne Westwood believes the foundation of a meaningful and productive life lies in the development of personal identity via the process of intellectual evolution. This, she believes, can be found through the exploration of three key areas – environment and responsibility, politics and justice, thoughts and culture. The intention of this paper is to distil the key influences in Westwood's psyche and contextualise them in order to gain a greater understanding of her diverse sources of inspiration. By challenging existing conventions, new thinking can evolve. As a self-confessed activist and advocate of cultural appreciation, Vivienne Westwood believes art links the past, present and future. She discourages consumerism and encourages the individual to identify and follow their deepest interest. This mantra, she states, allows the individual to achieve a sense of personal progress and embark on a journey of self-discovery - the key to inner awareness and outward expression. An advocate of reading books rather than scanning social media, make do and mend rather than mass consumption, and history rather than modernism, her unique – and often radical - philosophy has become a rallying cry for a new generation of fashion followers. Analysing and outlining the core inspirations and influences in Vivienne Westwood's arsenal, the aim is also to investigate these in a fashion context, dissecting how such disparate influence can be applied and translated in a sartorial form. Beginning with one of the most powerful and indelible subcultures - Punk - this wide-ranging examination sheds light on both the approach and application of Vivienne Westwood's cultural, political and environmental interests. Furthermore it explains aspects of the specific influences, from Aldous Huxley to Lewis Carroll, Boucher to Fragonard, The Wallace Collection to The British Library. In Westwood's own words 'Everything is Connected'. Within this eclectic mix of influences the thought process of one of the most unique and radical fashion designers emerges.

Introduction: Making ugliness beautiful: Politics and Justice

'Punk was an evolution, a synthesis, to put together all the things we were interested in. Although social and political pressures can influence changes in fashion, the form it can take can never be predicted' (Westwood, 2016). The starting point for the definition of Vivienne Westwood's personal fashion identity was the invention - or more precisely co-creation - of punk. Together with her partner, Malcolm McLaren - a self-confessed provocateur and disciple of situationist art who was 'anti music, anti everything' - they were united in their rejection of the pacifist hippy ethos, choosing instead to turn symbols of anarchy into both a political statement and a fashion movement. Westwood did not predict the sociological and sartorial impact: 'I didn't consider myself a fashion designer at all at the time of punk' she stated, 'I was just using fashion as a way to express my resistance and to be rebellious' (Westwood, 2016). A foundation of disparate social and political influences played against a backdrop of youth dissatisfaction with the status quo. This most enduring of subcultures - with roots in both New York and London - became a byword for rebellion.

Gathering a coterie of disaffected youth, assembled by McLaren, provocatively entitled The Sex Pistols, punk's fashion stance and subversive philosophy now had an international voice and global stage. Even without the advent of the internet, their anarchic appearance left an indelible impression on the subculture psyche. 'The pistols facilitated a reframing and a re-imagining of English culture and left a legacy which has been drawn upon by a number of subsequent art and music subcultures' (Adams, 2008). McLaren formed the group as a means to define his existence and establish his persona as equal part agent provocateur and musical Svengali. 'I was always trying to find an identity, and the way you did that was to create a gang' (Deedson, 2000). The core components of punk – the identifying marks - are summed up deftly by Westwood as 'Iconographic: Rips and dirt, safety pins, zips and slogans and hairstyles. These motifs were so iconic in themselves – motifs of rebellion' (Westwood, 2016). There were also unravelling mohair jumpers, torn T-shirts, distressed fabrics, traditional tartans, discarded bin liners and elements of bondage. The lead singer of The Sex Pistols, John Lydon (aka Johnny Rotten), in discussion with Julien Temple, Director of seminal punk film *The Filth and the Fury* (2003) added obscure and esoteric influences to the Punk identity including Shakespeare's Richard III. The common denominator between Westwood and Lydon's definition was the foundation of DIY. This was a theme which was to run from Punk's conception throughout Westwood's consequent collections, adding a dimension of individuality largely unexplored in previous subcultures. It transcended to a proliferation of independent press productions which were also based on DIY 'Most interestingly, though, most analyses of punk zines pay particular attention to the visual language with these publications and the way this symbolised punk. As we have noted, in Hebdige, it is seen in terms of the same bricolage that characterised punk dress and music' (Grimes and Wall, 2016).

It is important to note that Westwood herself experienced the strictures of Utility clothing regulations imposed by the British Government during the Second World War. Born in 1941, she had actively participated in Do It Yourself pursuits - advocated under the guise of Make Do And Mend - as a social norm and financial necessity during her adolescence. Westwood took it one stage further: in a world dominated by aspirational fashion, her version of DIY was as a symbol of liberation and freedom from designer imposition. 'The role of DIY activity in the creation of self-identity is clearly an important one, and it is not unconnected to the issue of design democracy' (Atkinson, 2008). This theme was used for Westwood's Do It Yourself Spring/Summer 2009 collection in which a manifesto, handwritten by Westwood, and including inexpensive sartorial suggestions became the show invitation. Completely rejecting - and in direct contradiction to - the carefree aura of the swinging sixties, Punk embraced aggression, confrontation, and the ideology of individuality. Graphic T-shirts - emblazoned with the word 'Destroy', a Swastika, an image of the crucifixion, the subversion of royal regalia portrayed The Queen with a safety pin piercing her mouth.

During the past decade, the definition of punk or 'True Punk' as she was later to reiterate, Westwood now applies to political prisoners, freedom fighters, and individuals who have risked their lives to expose war crimes via the World Wide Web. Westwood had been supporting and petitioning for the release of Leonard Peltier for decades. Jailed in 1977 for the murder of two FBI agents (a charge which Peltier has repeatedly denied since his conviction) Westwood not only corresponded personally with Peltier, but also produced 'Free Leonard Peltier' badges, a canvas belt, T-shirt and buckle sold through her World's End shop. His case, Westwood believes, has global significance. 'Peltier's response to a denial of clemency in 2001 reveals how Peltier appealed to non-American Indian supporters to join in a broader struggle for American Indian social Justice revealing a rhetorical strategy of transference from individual to collective (Endres, 2011). Westwood's more recent political causes have focussed on freedom of information and what she terms 'misrule of law'. She publicly supported and campaigned for the release of Bradley Manning in May 2013 arriving at the opening of the 'Punk: Chaos to Couture' exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, her evening gown embellished with an A4 photograph of Bradley Manning in a plastic sleeve with the word 'Truth' in red positioned at the bottom. Interviewed on live television she directed attention to her 'jewellery'. The interview was cut short and she was subsequently deleted from the visual roll call of celebrities attending the event as recorded by Condé Nast. Manning also appealed to Westwood's support of ambiguous sexuality and gender fluidity when Bradley made the decision to become Chelsea. 'As I transition into this next phase of my life, I want everyone to know the real me. I am Chelsea Manning. I am female. These words began a media frenzy when Private Manning, convicted for violations of the Espionage Act and other offences related to the release of classified information to WikiLeaks, announced to the world on August 22nd 2013 that she was a transgender woman' (Capuzza, 2015).

'He's a war hero. He exposed American war crimes.' was Westwood's assessment of Julian Assange on live TV link with TBU News, broadcast on 30th March 2018. Assange is the WikiLeaks founder who Westwood visits on a regular basis whilst he seeks refuge at the Ecuadorian Embassy in London. 'At the moment it is safe to conclude that diplomatic asylum has developed into a recognised concept in Latin and Central America, but elsewhere in the world it is rejected as a legal right and regarded as more like a matter of humanitarian practice' (Vark, 2012). Concerned about the blurred diplomatic lines and lack of definition regarding Assange's incarceration, Vivienne Westwood became a staunch supporter. In his fifth year of diplomatic asylum, at the showing of her Spring/Summer 2017 show she showed a short video declaring her support for the release of the WikiLeaks founder. In turn, Julian Assange offered a critique of her creativity 'I encouraged her to see the value in her work, that it is something that can bridge a gap and I think educate people. It is completely unique in that she has been so successful in what she does' (Assange, 2017). Declaring an allegiance with Assange's predicament, Westwood developed a T-shirt with a portrait of herself with the words 'I am Julian Assange'. Calling Assange 'a True Punk', she compared her political involvement with the characteristics of punk. The core qualities of liberty, free speech and subversive behaviour that combined to characterise the most anarchic of subcultures: 'What is punk attitude? I guess I'm a punk because I'm a fighter. You're born with the character you have got and I always fight. I can't help it' (Westwood, 2018).

'Everything is Connected': Thoughts and Culture

A staunch advocate of the psychological stimulus of reading books rather than absorbing information via digital means, Vivienne Westwood had a small library installed at the front entrance to her design studio in London's Elcho Street. Launched in September 2013 and intended to educate and enlighten her staff, the concise literary collection contains three works which she regularly cites as fundamental to her thinking. 'Reading matters. It is the most concentrated form of experience' declared Westwood, a former primary school teacher. Her statement underlined the research findings of 'Those who use literature based reading instruction to challenge the basal tradition boast stunning levels of success with all types of students and particularly with disabled and uninterested readers (O'Tunnell, and Jacobs, 1989). The launch of the Westwood library made a direct connection to Westwood's environmental call to arms, 'Climate Revolution'. Believing that 'Knowledge of the past lends perspective to the present and insight into the future', the focus of the opening was an analysis of author John Steinbeck's 1939 novel which won both the Nobel and Pulitzer prize for literature, *The Grapes of Wrath*. Set during the Great Depression, Westwood underlined the message of the book by showing the Oscar-winning film of 1940, directed by John Ford. In an exercise in compare and contrast, according to Westwood 'the book continues beyond the point where the film stops and though the chances of survival for the family the pathos of

the final scene is unsurpassed in literature' (Westwood, 2013). Produced during an extraordinarily short time-frame (between June and October 1938), '*The Grapes of Wrath* is a controversial classic because it is at once populist and revolutionary' (DeMott, 1989).

Westwood's most enduring literary memory from her childhood is *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll. This holds an enduring fascination for Westwood primarily because the author, aka Charles Lutwidge Dodgson was a mathematician, but also because it retains its relevance to adulthood. 'As in all good books for children, it is not only for children for the child in all. The lack of love, of regard for other people, the intense cruelty, the rebellion against rhyme and reason, the final distortion of everything seen through the looking glass does not matter' (Grotjahn, 1947). Such is Westwood's longstanding admiration of Carroll's literary masterpiece, that the themes and variations contained within have been translated into her Red Label collection, most visibly for Autumn/Winter 2015 and also formed the basis for the narrative of her Active Resistance to Propaganda, a symposium on culture which Westwood defined as 'the exploration and cultivation of humanity through art'. To commemorate the 150th anniversary of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, first published in 1865, Westwood was to redesign the front cover insisting that the literary work still featured the original illustrations by Sir John Tenniel, principal political cartoonist for Punch. It also contained an introduction by Westwood calling for the end to capitalism and a cryptic statement summarising her thoughts on fiction: 'Truth becomes fiction when the fiction's true. Real becomes not real when the unreal's real' (Westwood, 2015).

The sartorial work – particularly pertinent in graphic representation - of Vivienne Westwood is underpinned by an examination of literature which explores dystopian themes. 'The first recorded use of dystopia (which has another derivation neologism) dates back to 1868, and is to be found in a parliamentary speech in which John Stuart Mill tried to find a name for a perspective which was opposing that of Utopia. If Utopia was commonly seen as 'too good to be practicable', then dystopia was 'too bad to be practicable' (Claeys, 2010). Fundamental to Westwood's philosophy are the authors of visionary works which have sought to imagine the causes and consequences of a totalitarian state: E.M. Forster's *The Machine Stops*, first published in 1909 and George Orwell's *1984*, published four decades later, in 1949. 'Orwell's concerns regarding the abuse of power, the denial of self, and the eradication of both past and future continue to resonate in contemporary discussions of politics and society' (Tyner, 2004).

Whilst reading Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* Westwood inadvertently discovered the advanced ideology deployed by Huxley, expressing admiration for his ingenuity in her blog entitled 'Get A Life'. 'A world run by organisation for the sake of organisation. The desired population is created in a laboratory – test tube babies! Huxley's Brother, a scientist, was astonished that Aldous had worked out how to do this (their Grandfather, T H Huxley was a famous scientist – the populariser of

Darwin)' (Westwood, 2014). As Westwood focussed on Huxley's uncanny ability to predict the future, she was also aware of his psychoanalytical powers. 'Huxley seems to have been using the 'Oedipus complex' not as a target for mockery in *Brave New World* but as a weapon in his satirical attack on the mores of modern life and on its Utopian fantasies' (Buckanan, 2002). The title '*Brave New World*' emblazoned on a man's T-shirt with the Shakespearean quotation 'What's done cannot be undone' circling the neck. In a single sartorial statement, Westwood marked a literary milestone. 'It is not surprising that Aldous Huxley's last words in print were about William Shakespeare' (Meckien, 1945). Running parallel to Westwood's preoccupation with literary Utopian works, her presentation of Englishness often reflects and reinvents a time when our cultural identity was internationally indelible: 'Westwood is not accurately replicating English history, but rather re-inventing it to create an idealised form of Utopian dress' (Choi, 2005). Westwood's admiration for Aldous Huxley extended to the invention of an imaginary pharmaceutical invention. Entitled NINSDOL, Westwood used an acronym to capture Huxley's definition of the three evils, an acronym for 'Nationalist Idolatry', 'Non stop Distraction' and 'Organised Lying'. Of these three evils Westwood assessed the most dangerous as being 'non stop distraction.' Translated into a graphic print, this also became the theme for the Propaganda Autumn/Winter 2005/6 show 'It occurred to me that these 3 evils were the constituents of Propaganda. 'We might say that NINSDOL is a pill which is administered throughout life. Have you had your daily dose?' (Westwood, 2016).

'Knowledge of the past lends perspective to the present and insight into the future. All my ideas come from studying the ideas of the past. I design clothes in the hope of breaking convention' (Westwood, 1996). At the beginning of her career – notably the first 'Pirate' collection where Westwood became an independent entity - it involved the dissection of 18th century shirts and Westwood focussed her research on the archives at the V&A Museum. She then studied the art of the Greeks stating 'the art of the Greeks has never been surpassed. We are tantalised by this golden age of global expression' and producing a collection entitled '*Voyage to Cythera*'. The concept of nudity had been explored by Anne Hollander in her seminal work *Seeing Through Clothes*, concluding 'For the Western world, the distinction between being dressed and undressed has always been crucial'. Westwood created a unique juxtaposition: Greek drapery with Savile Row tailoring in her 'Britain Must Go Pagan' series which began in 1987. 'The nude always means the fashion of her time. Patrons of Titian see his nude through Playboy eyes' (Westwood, 1996). During her historical research she discovered the pourpoint jacket – a 14th century invention, originally designed to be worn under armour, which she stated 'caused a revolution in fashion'. As her design signature became progressively decorative, she visited The Wallace Collection. A three part series entitled 'Painted Ladies' aired in 1996, formed the foundation for an extended analysis of the relationship between painting and fashion. The three episodes were divided into 'Nobility, Virtue, Morality', 'Aesthetic Lust', and finally 'Luxury and Frivolity'. The introductory statement

Westwood makes in the first episode: ‘Orthodoxy is the grave of intelligence’ has been translated, in her own handwriting, onto an oversized T-shirt. Westwood’s Portrait collection of Autumn/Winter 1990 – the collection most closely aligned with the Wallace Collection - depicted Francois Boucher’s study of a shepherd watching a sleeping shepherdess from Longui’s pastoral romance ‘Daphnis and Chloe’ on the front panel of her ‘Stature of Liberty’ corset. She included 17th Century engravings from a Boulle design at the back of a mirror, the colour palette inspired by the Royal Manufactory of Sevres porcelain.

By the dawn of the millennium, the study of fashion history, previously the domain of museum curators and archivists was now the focus of public fascination and academic discussion. ‘From the last 15 years the field of dress history has been subject to passionate and sometimes acrimonious debate. Within the context of the history of decorative arts and design, material culture and museology and other related cultural theory, the study of dress has undergone the greatest appropriation and transformation’ (Taylor, 2015). Now universally acclaimed as an interpreter of historical methodology, Westwood was spearheading the exploration. She became an emblem for the introduction of historic fashion discourse from a creator – not curator – perspective. ‘Over the last decade or so, the study of the clothes in art has been firmly established as one of the essential approaches to dress history, as Roche suggests, such a study requires the skills of both historian *and* art historian’ (Ribeiro 1998). From this point, Westwood would transfer her attention from street art to old masters. Westwood repeatedly cited The Wallace collection as ‘the best school in the whole country’ (Westwood, 1996). Of Gainsborough portraits, Westwood enthused ‘My God. The fashion and the beauty. England’s greatest painter’ (Westwood, 1996).

‘Consumption is the enemy of Culture’: Environment and Responsibility

‘My motto is: Buy Less, Choose Well, Make it Last. You can change your lifestyle and it will cost you less. Essentially we are all trained to be consumers. You have to invest in culture, not in consumption.’ Vivienne Westwood reiterating her mantra on 24th September 2017 at The Royal Festival Hall, Southbank Centre, wearing a plain white T-shirt inside out, seams exposed, with the words ‘Buy Less’ handpainted in black on the right hand side of the torso.

Acutely aware of the conflicting nature of a fashion designer whose business model pivots on purchasing power, Westwood advocated restraint. She repeated the rallying cry against consumerism she had been relaying for a decade. Despite her genuine sense of conviction and repeated demands for anti-consumerist activity, Vivienne Westwood remains a contradictory figure in the ongoing discourse and debate on the contemporary issues of ethical practice, ecological awareness and mass consumption. With a company turnover which rose to £40.8 million in 2017

from £37.5 million a year earlier, her stance on the environment and subsequent juxtaposition of luxury fashion aligned to political activism would appear to conflict with preconceived ideas on profit versus political conscience. She remains the only fashion designer in history to publicly pronounce an anti-consumerist statement, namely 'Buy Less', which could feasibly be perceived as a public relations disaster. However, the personal identity of Vivienne Westwood – one of a designer actively involved in changing the attitudes to the acquisition of luxury goods and landscape of sartorial consumption – has prevailed. In a single case study on a Vivienne Westwood entitled 'Vivienne Westwood and the Ethics of Consuming Fashion', undertaken in 2015 the investigators Jean S. Clarke and Robin Holt found there was a clear alignment between the creator and the consumer with the dialogue of design a common denominator. 'Ethics in consumption is a critical engagement with how products such as clothes are bought... Consumers find themselves personally implicated with and caring for a designer's work and become responsible for reflecting on their own consumption decisions rather than cheaply satisfying immediate demands' (Clark and Holt, 2015).

Westwood in person is detached from the digital world. Privately, she is not in possession of a television, laptop or mobile telephone. However, in common with other international luxury brands, social media has been deployed by both Vivienne Westwood the designer and Vivienne Westwood the company as a method of mass communication to directly engage with customers on a global scale. Westwood is unique in this consumer arena in that she not only uses social media on a multiple platforms: Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, in addition to three separate but interlinking internet sites which convey the message of both the Westwood merchandise and her personal political and cultural leanings. Within the company Vivienne Westwood website, the consumer will find eclectic footage: 'The creation of an iconic shoe. Craftsmanship & Longevity' alongside an interview with Vivienne Westwood entitled 'Intellectuals Unite'. These virtual mixed messages are a unique strategy to retain the interest of the existing and capture the attention of the prospective customer. 'As competition among luxury brands becomes more intense, by providing plenty of alternatives to customers, the brand's prosperity seems no longer quite so promising. The importance of managing customers as valuable assets cannot be emphasised more' (Kim, 2010). The question of personal identity, ethical commitment and the all-important presence of authenticity are key factors in the creation of an ethical awareness. 'Since individual identity continually evolves, and requires a conflicted materially referential re-imagining of self to do so, we hypothesize that actual rather than faux luxury brands can, ironically unite the ideals of fashion with those of environmental sustainability' (Joy et al., 2012).

The design signature of Vivienne Westwood is also of critical importance. The company textile mandate which involves the use of organic cotton, the emphasis on pure wool, the inclusion of natural, often recycled, fibres are all crucial to the design DNA. Although the label is regarded as a luxury brand, the core philosophy can be

applied to an ecological framework. Unlike Chanel and Louis Vuitton, the Westwood brand – and its figurehead - has a longstanding association with sustainability. The concept of sustainability - first presented at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 – within ten years became the template for ethical fashion practice. The concept was adopted with increasing regularity by brands whose existence had previously depended primarily upon the rarefied qualities of their products. ‘At first sight luxury and sustainability go together like tofu and caviar. In reality, the two share many of the same values: Respect for tradition and craftsmanship, the preference given to quality over quantity and the quest for harmony between humans and nature’ (Scanlon, 2016).

When Westwood adopted a sustainable policy, key changes were made on product lines. A contract with Melissa shoes, who were producing plastic shoes which proved to be phenomenally financially successful for Westwood was not renewed. Westwood herself prevented the opening of a proposed branch of Vivienne Westwood in Beijing, fearing a lack of control of her product and consequent mass production in the Far East.

By 2010, Westwood’s political interests were being crystallised into two camps: social and environmental responsibility. There was a ‘Westwood Inspired Repurposing Clothing Workshop’ screened Live from the British Library. In addition, Vivienne Westwood actively backed Save the Arctic, Cool Earth, Greenpeace, and Anti-Fracking demonstrations around the UK. When the Vivienne Westwood Ethical Fashion Africa Project was launched in 2011 Westwood was adamant that the initiative centred on employment. ‘It gives people control. Charity doesn’t give control. It does the opposite. It makes them dependent.’ The programme, which had enlisted 7,000 local women, was conceived to produce accessories for Westwood in return for a fair wage. There was – and is – a marked difference in quality of products made by artisans in Africa to the mainstream line. However, the design signature and ethos has been retained. ‘Change is possible but it has to come from the fashion domain. Aesthetics is crucial to the appeal of eco fashion’ (Joy et al., 2012).

The shifting social conscience – an awareness which is evident in the younger generation - plays a vital part in the repositioning of sustainable fashion. Kim Jones, Dior Menswear Creative Director took a retrospective look at the purchasing habits of his contemporaries in comparison to his peers. ‘People didn’t buy 32 pairs of Jimmy Choos and Louboutins. People didn’t have 16 pairs of sunglasses. People didn’t have 22 dresses. They just didn’t. They had these clothes to go out and have fun with. They wore these clothes. When you got this Westwood or whatever you wore it four times a week’ (Jones, 2015).

It is, however, the consistent involvement with ethical and environmental endeavours that has established Vivienne Westwood as a designer synonymous with social responsibility. She has been proactive in promoting a Green Economy and is visibly

present at Anti-Fracking demonstrations. She has travelled globally to protect the rainforest and consistently campaigned to Save the Arctic. It is the actions, not words, which have set Westwood apart. ‘Transparency is the first synergy and important pillar in the self-understanding of the founder as transparency typically evokes trust. Those players who communicate in a transparent way cannot and do not want to hide anything’ (Dickenbrok, 2018). The identity of Vivienne Westwood which began to take shape against a backdrop of anarchy in the 1970s has, over half a century, become progressively synonymous with activism. With few exceptions – for example, Stella McCartney and Katharine Hamnett - the fashion industry did not lead by example, but followed the status quo. Westwood, together with McCartney, was instrumental in changing public perception on sustainability.

On 10th December 2018 Vivienne Westwood received ‘The Swarovski Award for Positive Change’ at the British Fashion Council (BFC) Awards ceremony at the Albert Hall. With accolades by Greenpeace and Cool Earth, the BFC underlined the reasoning for the presentation, citing ‘Her continued work to promote and engage with the industry positively in making a global change for the benefit for the environment.’

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