4 From Berghain to Balenciaga

Aesthetic Code-Switching between Parisian High Fashion and Berlin Underground Techno

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Abstract: *Borrowing and appropriating aesthetic codes from subcultural scenes has a long-standing tradition in high fashion. Often, these phenomena are criticised as watering-down or selling-out of marginalised political, social or cultural properties that are perceived as authentic to these scenes. By analysing and contextualising the aesthetic semblances between collections of the Parisian fashion house Balanciaga under its creative director Demna Gvasalia and the dress-code at Berlin's most famous techno club Berghain, the question is raised, whether the concept of "subcultural capital" needs to be updated to keep up with the realities of today's multi-facetted, digitalised information society. Both worlds, that of French high fashion and of Berlin underground-techno are examined as separate, yet overlapping spheres on meaning production. The concepts of aesthetic code-switching and mutual benefits are also highlighted.*

Keywords: *Berghain; Balanciaga; subcultural capital; subcultural appropriation; aesthetic code-switching*

1 Prologue: the ficklety of fashion

When I first received the request to contribute a lecture on the topic of fashion for the conference *State of art in night studies and club cultures in a Franco-German perspective* in the fall of 2021, I didn't need to think twice about the subject I was going to talk about.

At the time, the French luxury label Balenciaga and its über-famous Creative Director Demna Gvasalia, virtually dominated the fashion world. The Met Gala, probably the most media-rich international fashion event, had recently taken place for the first time after a two-year pandemic hiatus. People were starved for glitz and glamour and finally wanted to see exciting clothes on the red carpet again after the dreary sweatpants period. Some of the most photographed stars at the event, including Ri-

hanna, Kim Kardashian, Isabelle Huppert or Elliot Ross wore looks by Balenciaga that evening.

A luxury fashion label becoming the darling of high society is nothing new in itself. At other times it was Chanel, Versace or Gucci. What made the hype around Balenciaga so special was the nature of the designs, which gave the public image of exclusive designer fashion and the idea of luxury a whole new direction. Demna understood the desirabilities of internet culture better than any other contemporary designer. He knew that people still turned to fashion to demonstrate status and superiority, but that the old codes of glamour and high fashion had become meaningless and boring.

In an interview by the *British Vogue*, he explained: "[A logo] can give someone a notion—a feeling—of belonging to whatever social group they want to be seen as part of." (Madsen, 2021, para. 8)

In the following, I will mainly focus on the striking parallelism between elite social spheres normally associated with luxury consumption and the Berlin Underground Techno Scene, especially Berghain, that has been dubbed "the world's most exclusive club" (Lifestyle Desk, 2022, para. 1; Linux, 2022, para. 1). I will argue that in a world rattled with crisis, the lifestyle of easy leisure, jewels, champagne and private jets has lost much of its appeal. Instead, Demna set out to sell decadence and a hint of darkroom sex. By copying, recreating and sharpening typical outfits of Berlin clubbers, head-to-toe black and combining sportswear with fetish elements, Balenciaga's rapid rise was based on what has come to be known as the Berghain look.

It was by pure chance that the conference in Paris took place at the same time as Paris Fashion Week. Just a few days after my presentation on stage at La Gaîté Lyrique, on October 2nd, 2022, Balenciaga showed its spring/summer 2023 collection in a spectacular setting: Spanish artist Santiago Sierra had created a dystopian backdrop out of 275 cubic metres of mud at the Parc des Expositions de Villepinte convention centre on the outskirts of Paris. The notoriously bad-tempered models trudged through puddles and mud, sullying their shoes and soaking the hems of their floor-length dresses in the process. Some carried handbags that looked like tattered teddy bears.

The events, which immediately followed my lecture at the conference have changed the way the Balenciaga aesthetic shaped by Demna is received today. Therefore, an inventory of the different references that exist between this aesthetic and the clothing practices of Berlin clubbers, and more broadly, between the Parisian luxury industry and the Berlin underground, must necessarily include an analysis of the scandalization of this aesthetic in mainstream discourse.

Fashion social media was full of pictures of Balenciaga's mud spectacle over the next few days. Many were enthusiastic, some disturbed, as usual since Demna took the helm at Balenciaga. Nevertheless, in retrospect, it seems that this evening of October 2nd, this show, was a turning point. The tectonic plates of crowd favour and

contemporary taste had begun to shift, heading inexorably toward a catastrophic collision.

The show was opened by the rapper Kanye West, who at that time was also extremely successful as a designer thanks to his collaboration with the sporting goods manufacturer Adidas. But West, who wore a kind of futuristic combat suit, had repeatedly made negative headlines in the months prior, for example, in connection with the divorce from his ex-wife Kim Kardashian, who accused him of harassment and stalking. Many wondered why Balenciaga continued to hold on to West as a celebrity model. But worse was to come.

Just one day after his appearance in Balenciaga's muddy arena, West publicly showed up in Paris holding hands with right-wing conservative political commentator Candace Owens. Both wore T-shirts apparently designed by West himself, printed with the controversial slogan "White Lives Matter" on the back.

Now things came thick and fast: On October 8th, West sent out a tweet announcing a personal vendetta against "Jewish People". Over the next few days, he became increasingly unhinged, seemingly entangled in anti-Semitic conspiracy theories, partly in response to public criticism of his statement (American Jewish Committee, 2023).

On October 21st, Balenciaga ended its collaboration with Kanye West, but as it turned out, the real problems for Balenciaga were yet to begin. A few weeks later, in November 2022, Balenciaga released an ad campaign for its mock-merchandise line Balenciaga Objects. On the associated website, everything from lighters, key chains and coffee mugs to bedding and dog food bowls were available for purchase—at extremely high prices and featuring the Balenciaga logo. Italian documentary photographer Gabriele Galimberti was hired for the campaign. Two years earlier, in 2020, Galimberti had enjoyed great international success with his *Toy Stories* series, which showed children around the world in their bedrooms, with their possessions neatly lined up in front of them. The ad images for Balenciaga were conceived in a very similar way, but with some crucial differences: the children were cast, the bedrooms were built by set designers, and instead of toys, pieces from the Balenciaga Objects collection lay draped at their feet. The children wore sportswear with the Balenciaga logo and held the tattered teddy bear handbags that had previously been part of the Paris mud show in their tiny hands. Due to the calmer staging of the images, the details were now more eye-catching: one bear wore a fishnet shirt and studded wristbands, another black leather straps around his torso. In the media, the talk quickly turned to "stuffed toy[s] in bondage gear" (Rao, 2022) or "BDSM teddy bears" (Diaz, 2022). Kim Kardashian, who had happily posed in head-to-toe Balenciaga just days earlier, now expressed feeling "disgusted and outraged" (Twitter, 2022) by the label. In the following weeks, the scandal continued to draw complicated circles, eventually showing all elements of a full-blown conspiracy theory (see in Paton, Friedman & Testa, 2022). The reputation of a fashion house, perhaps that of an entire indus-

try, was at stake—as well as a great deal of money. Within a single season, Balenciaga dropped from the most-searched fashion brand on Google to a modest place 18, social media posts, especially on TikTok, featuring Hashtags such as #cancelbalenciaga or #burnbalenciaga accumulated more than 300 million views, flagship stores in London and Los Angeles were vandalised (Gárgoles & Ambás, 2023).

Demna, who rarely gave interviews and had never commented in the past on any of the numerous scandals he caused, finally broke his silence on December 2nd, 2022 and apologised publicly. In March 2023 he showed his next collection in Paris: simple, minimalist, scandal-free. He had now realised, he wrote in a personal note left on the chairs of the invited guests, that fashion had changed, that it could no longer be a form of entertainment (Issawi, 2023).

2 *Trash Chic*: Balenciaga and the Invention of New Luxury

In order to properly understand the rise and fall of Balenciaga, a brief look at the label's history is necessary: founded in 1917 by the Basque couturier Christobál Balenciaga, the house has been headquartered in Paris since 1937. The designer enjoyed great success, especially in the 1950s and 1960s, by helping to shape a new, free and extravagant image of women. Balenciaga reinterpreted the tunic and successfully launched the baby doll dress and the sack dress. Covering the female body in opulent fabrics, creating silhouettes that defied the natural shape of the female figure, was a bold step away from Dior's New Look which had dominated the previous decade. Accessible only to a handful of well-heeled upper-class customers, Balenciaga's voluminous gowns redefined luxury: instead of squeezing into uncomfortable clothes to show off their tiny waists, ladies now wore almost architectural structures that allowed them to take up space (Gilligan, 2017).

In 1968 Christobál Balenciaga withdrew from the public eye. Although he had been a visual pioneer of the hippie movement with his loose fitting, eye-catching dresses, he did not like the new shape of society, characterised by youth cultural protests. He missed the glamour of high society, famously stating: "There is no one left to dress." (Fury, 2013, para. 1)

After Balenciaga's death in 1972, several attempts were made to revive the label, designers Nicholas Ghesquière and Alexander Wang were hired as creative directors, but it only achieved modest success.

It wasn't until 2015, when Georgian Demna Gvasalia, who had previously made headlines as the mastermind behind design collective Vetements, took over, that the Balenciaga was able to return to its old glory days. Demna's recipe was conceivably

simple and a little irreverent: instead of rummaging through Balanciaga's archives to score points with contemporary interpretations of iconic designs, as Ghesquière and Wang had tried to do, he unceremoniously exported Vetements' already successful concept to his new employer. In fact, the designs of Balenciaga and Vetements (Demna remained in charge here until 2019) meshed so seamlessly that it would have been almost impossible to tell them apart without the excessive all-over prints of the respective brand names, one of the distinguishing features of Demna's style (Talon, 2015).

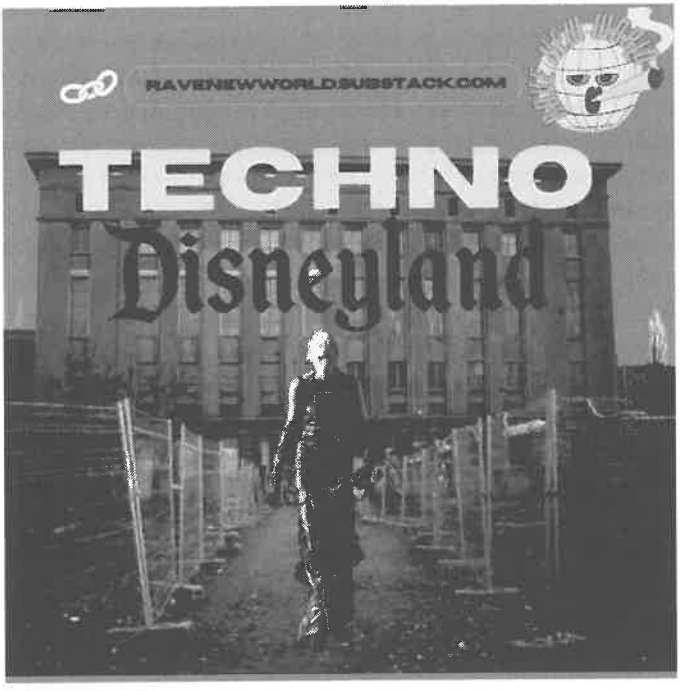
As a result, not a season went by without Balenciaga launching another well-calculated scandal. The approach was always the same: Demna was inspired by set pieces from youth and trash culture and translated them into sinfully expensive status symbols. For Fall/Winter 2016, he designed the "Bazar Bag", a tote bag made of the finest calfskin leather, whose design was inspired by the cheap nylon bags used by flying merchants to transport their goods. In January 2017, Balenciaga launched the "Triple S" Sneaker, a chunky white athletic shoe with a thick sole made of foamed plastic. The introduction of this sneaker model represents an important triggering moment for the fashion of the 2010s, because not only was the term "Ugly Sneaker" on everyone's lips, but the trend of luxury labels now competing in the sneaker market for a young clientele continued (Luis Vuitton followed a year later with the "Archlight" model, in 2020 Dior collaborated with Nike etc.). In 2022, Demna's strategy of recreating cheap and unglamorous commodities as luxury items reached a new level by launching the aptly named "Trash Bag" as well as the "Lay's x Balenciaga Potato Chips Clutch".

While this technique of counteracting the high fashion realm with mundane or "low-class" codes will be examined in detail later on, it must be noted, that the Demna-era Balenciaga aesthetic was from the outset not only linked to popular consumer culture but to a specific pop-cultural cluster of knowledge. Recurring motifs in Balanciaga's collections, such as all-black outfits, chunky sneakers, wrap-around sunglasses and BDSM accessories such as leather face masks or dog collars, have been closely associated with Berlin's underground rave scene, especially the Berghain crowd. Within just a few years, the aesthetic connection between the club Berghain and the label Balenciaga were perceived as symbiotic to such an extent, that it was often not clear who was referring to whom—or how this similarity should be evaluated culturally. One fashion blogger, for example, noted that Balenciaga's Instagram account "looks like a private account of someone who parties at Berghain" (Ventus, 2019, para. 2). While a glossy magazine admired the fact that the crowd at Berghain looked like they just came from a Balenciaga show (Riedl, 2022).

Fig. 1: A meme suggesting a look from Balenciaga's Fall 2022 collection as a suitable outfit for a night out at Berghain (Instagram, @berlinclubmemes, 2021)

However, this apparent love affair between high fashion looks and electronic music did not appeal to everyone: a music journalist complained that Berghain had become "a soulless simulation of cool" (Lhooq, 2022, para. 6), underlining his assessment by stating that "[h]alf the dancefloor looked like they stepped off the Balenciaga runway" (Lhooq, 2022, para. 6). The article was accompanied by a photomontage of one of Demna's mud-pit models clad in black leather and chains, only now stomping through the gravel in front of the club's entrance.

Fig. 2: A photo montage of a Balenciaga SS23 look in front of Berghain (Lhooq, 2022)



3 Authenticity and the Myth of *Subcultural Capital*

The term *style tribes*, also sometimes referred to as *aesthetic tribes, was* coined by anthropologist Ted Polhemus (1994) to describe the fragmentation of society through a multitude of visually recognizable subgroups and was quickly adopted by consumer and youth culture research. Even if the concept of a modern-day tribalism has some problematic aspects (Fluehr-Lobban, Lobban & Linda, 1976), the idea remains important, that consumption styles have become the salient markers of value communities in the late 20th century, even before social class, regional origin, etc. As Maffesoli (2007) writes: "In the same way that politics were the sign of modernity, aesthetics may be the sign of postmodern society." (p. 27)

The early techno scene in Berlin took pride in its diversity and inclusiveness, ravers who gathered for events like the Love Parade, that took place in its original form between 1989 and 2003, were referred to as "family" and adopted the values of "Peace, Love, Unity, Respect" (PLUR) as their catchphrase (Perry, 2019).

The early "techno-look" that emerged in the mid-1990s reflected this naïve, hippie-esque attitude through its fondness of bright colours, unusual materials such as plastic and plush, as well as the incorporation of playful, even childish, elements such as teddy bears, ornate hair clips and pacifiers. Perry (2019) describes Marusha's video aesthetic for her early rave-goes-mainstream-hit "Somewhere": "Sexualized but also infantilized, Marusha and her toys collapse childhood and adult-hood into a reverie of happy, dreaming youth unfolding in the vacant space of an eternal present." (p. 567)

Martin Wuttke, who founded the Berlin-based fashion company Next G+U.R+U Now in 1995 explained that clothes for ravers had to be comfortable enough to dance all night. That's why they started to wear sneakers to the clubs, preferring running or hiking models to the basketball and skate shoes of the hip hop crowd. Designers like Wuttke took cues from sportswear and functional clothing but made them "sexy" (Blumhardt, 2012, p. 167). It only took a few years for clubwear to become a mass-market (Blumhardt, 2012, p. 167). Naturally, ravers sought for new ways to distinguish themselves from the mainstream. The Berlin scene increasingly divided itself into different clubs and musical styles, whose adherents were recognizable to insiders at first glance by aesthetic codes. While some preferred the overt campness of glittery make-up and feather boas, others were drawn to tougher military-inspired looks.

When talking about the "Berghain dress code", the colour black is almost always among the first things to be mentioned. A number of online platforms feature articles on how to increase the chances of being waved through by the club's notoriously strict bouncer, offering advice such as: the unwritten rule is to wear all black with some edgy accessories (leather harness, chains, etc.) (Cagney, 2019) or dress black and show some skin, but act like you don't try too hard (Stylight, n.d.). Of course, hardcore techno fans are by no means the only subculture choosing to express itself by wearing predominantly black. Some cultural theorists have pointed out that this preference is not arbitrary. They argue that the colour black holds some properties that make it ideally suited for expressing a disdain for worldly affairs and an orientation towards strictness and truthfulness (Dittmann, 2010). Stigglegger (2021, p. 83) refers to black as a metaphor for pop culture's abyss, its dark underbelly, while also pointing out that an all-black outfit can be seen as radical individualist as well as elitist, while Harvey (1995) interprets the conformist dominance of black clothes as the "putting on of Impersonality" (p. 257).

The deep bond between Berghain and the colour black can also be explained by a look at the club's history. Before Berghain, there was Ostgut, opened in 1998 and featuring a similar dystopian, post-industrial vibe as its successor. But Ostgut was predominantly a gay club, known for its hardcore and fetish events. Here, the dress codes of the gay leather scene came up against a younger rave crowd that preferred sportswear. Black soon became a common denominator, unifying both

groups of men. In 2000 Ostgut opened a second space on the first floor of the club called Panoramabar, that was from the outset aimed at a trendier crowd, including women and heterosexual men. What may have been regarded as a sell-out of queer spaces, or, as the owner argued, total inclusiveness. Whatever it was, it became an instant success. Almost immediately, Ostgut changed from a fringe techno fetish club to the hippest location in town (Meyer, 2014). After Ostgut was demolished in 2003, the club reopened as Berghain in 2004, upholding the concept of a hard main floor with access to darkrooms that are not exclusive to, yet predominantly used by gay men, and Panoramabar as a softer, more hetero-friendly upstairs location with cosy booths that offer some privacy (Andersson, 2022). Yet, the leather harnesses and stompy boots that dominated the main floor, were soon picked up as fashion accessories by the younger more trend-affinate crowd, years before they appeared on the Balenciaga runway. Still to this day, much of Berhgain's allure stems from its origin as an underground gay sex club, and while this scene still has its place in Berhgain today, the now world-famous dress code was adopted by a different subset.

The term *subcultural capital* was coined by Thornton (1995) and describes the status that comes along with having knowledge of a particular scene, possession of relevant physical objects, appearance through style, as well as the perceived commitment to or identification with that scene (Thornton, 1995; Force, 2009). In discourse surrounding subcultural practices, subcultural capital often goes hand in hand with the concept of authenticity, in the sense that one cannot be achieved without the other. At the most basic level, authenticity can be defined as "a reliable representation" of an original (Varga & Guignon, 2017). Vannini and Willimas (2009) add that

> authenticity is not so much a state of being as it is the objectification of a process of representation, that is, it refers to a set of qualities that people in a particular time and place have come to agree represent an ideal or exemplar (p. 3).

Seen from this perspective, subcultural capital and authenticity become almost indistinguishable from their simulations, since both require a high level of knowledge about a particular scene. Thornton's (1995, p. 203) observation, that this knowledge is (contrary to Bourdieu's original concept of cultural capital) mainly circulated by media, adds to the confusion. At the same time, Thornton (1995, p. 203) criticises that the political relevance of subcultural movements is often overstated in academic research. This is certainly true for the techno scene that wilfully refused to take part in traditional political action (Perry, 2019).

Is the Berghain look a cosplay of queer electronic music scene and its values? And if that's true, what exactly are those values?

It seems likely that the origins of the Berghain look lies in the observation and adaptation of the clubs first underground crowd, fanned by the ensuing media

frenzy. Because in the context of the club "subcultural capital largely overlaps with queer capital [...] looking like a sexual minority improves one's chances to get in" (Anderson, 2022, p. 457). So, it can be stated, an appropriation of subcultural codes had taken place within the club, long before Demna got his hands on them. What has come to be known as the Berghain look is indeed a mix of commodified gay fetish codes and the comfort of sportswear, held together by the colour black and pushed forward by the market-consciousness of urban hipsterism. Demna is far from being the first fashion designer to seek inspiration in the edgy styles of subcultural dress codes. At the latest since punk shook up the pop cultural landscape, borrowing from "the streets" had become a steady injection of newness for high fashion. Versace's legendary safety pin dress, famously worn by actress Liz Hurley to the premiere of then-boyfriend Hugh Grant's film *Four Weddings and A Funeral* in 1994, comes to mind. There is, however, one notable difference to the aspired ideal of coolness in the 21st century: even though Hurley's black Versace dress, revealingly held together by oversized golden safety pins, was credited with sparking a revolution in red-carpet evening wear (Holland, 2020), it remained very clear that Hurley was not part of punk culture, nor wanted to be. She was just a celebrity in a designer dress, albeit a daring one.

When analysing aesthetic practices on social media channels such as Instagram, the notion of authenticity is of particular importance. Younger consumers resent the idea of empty status symbols, wishing instead to partake in practices, scenes or encounters that are perceived as authentic. Berlin, especially, seemed to lend itself particularly well to a new type of "post-industrial urban pastoralism" (Garcia, 2016, p. 277). The city's gritty electronic music scene promised access to unique micro-cultural experiences that could not be found anywhere else.

For Fashion Influencers, Berghain became a rite of passage. It became fashionable to stage sneaky getaways to Berlin, posing in dingy hotel rooms, getting ready for a life-changing night out. In 2022 New York socialite Linux published a lengthy article about losing their "Berghain virginity" (Linux, 2022, para. 12), claiming: "Countless people from all walks of life, countries of origins, tax brackets and sexual orientations come to this techno centre of the universe with one common attribute: coolness." (Linux, 2022, para. 15)

Similarly, observing the club's strict no-photo policy has become a point of honour, underlining the fact that their visit to Berghain had been an authentic experience that could never be shared by those who had not been there. Their experience had been profound. They now belonged to a different sphere of knowledge. Yet typically, influencers such as Linux would come back at a different time to stage outfit posts in front of the closed club.

Fig. 3: Linux posing in fetish gear with a Balenciaga bag outside of the (closed) Berghain (Instagram, @im_linux, 2022)

Authenticity is in itself a deeply loaded concept that has been named "the truest hallmark of cool behaviour" (Southgate, 2003, p. 168). Berghain's iconic bouncer then becomes a sphinx-like figure that could separate the wheat from the chaff, the cool from the uncool—regardless of money, fame or followers. Along the same lines, in his analysis of the techno-tourism-phenomenon Rapp (2009) comes to the conclusion that Berlin's door policies are "radically democratic" (para. 4). This is true in the sense that subcultural capital is less class-bound than cultural capital (Thornton, 1995). Berghain does not discriminate based on race, class or gender, but substitutes them with a radically subjective code of aesthetics. While the club's entrance fee and drinks might still be cheap compared to other European capitals, assembling the right look might not be.

Contrary to Rapp's assessment, Anderson (2022) contends that at Berghain, "the choreography of the queue is especially brutal" (p. 457) forcing the rejects to a "walk of shame" (p. 457) along those still waiting in line. It can be argued that Berghain, "the most exclusive nightclub in the world" (Linux, 2022, para. 1), displays all markers of a privileged elite institution, especially since the majority of Berlin's techno-tourists, which have flushed money into the city's empty registers for the past two decades, are White-European and middle-class (Garcia, 2016).

4 Aesthetic Code-Switching: How low can you go?

The term code-switching originates from linguistics, where it is most commonly used to describe the language behaviour patterns of bilingual communities. However, some sociolinguists point to close links between language, class, ethnicity, and other social positions. Vogt (1954), for example, wrote that code-switching is at core a psychological phenomenon whose motivators and effects have to be sought outside of the linguistic field. The notion of visual or fashion code-switching has only been explored by a few writers that have addressed the issues of dress codes in the workplace. Analogous to linguistic code-switching, the authors examine how individuals' manoeuvre through different spheres of life, to each of which different codes are assigned—for example, those of the hegemonic majority and of migrant communities (Lowell, 2021; Quattlebaum, 2020).

A number of fashion theorists, following Roland Barthes, examine fashion as a form of articulation that functions through codes (Leutner, 2015). In his 1988 book Culture and Consumption, anthropologist Grant McCracken argued that fashion objects as units of meaning cannot be equated with words because it is impossible to combine them into "body-sentences". As an example, McCracken cited an empirical experimental set-up in which a stimulus figure wore an elegant man's suit with coarse workman's boots. He recorded that this unusual combination threw the observing subjects into deep confusion, since the presented subject could not be fully assigned to either the bourgeois or working-class domain (McCracken, 1988, p. 64ff.).

Applying these considerations to Balenciaga's iconic fashion objects—such as the Triple S sneaker or the Trash Bag—it seems that the fashion public has evolved in the 25 years since McCracken's study. Not only was it now apparently capable of differentiating between the "cheap" surface aesthetics of the products and their monetary as well as cultural value as design objects, but it found pleasure in precisely these semantic breaks. To put it another way: The "Lay's x Balenciaga Potato Chips Clutch" was controversially discussed on social media and by the fashion press and interpreted either as a brilliant commentary on throwaway culture, a funny joke, or simply as a piss-take—yet the participants in the discourse from the start had no

issue with grasping the cognitive tension between a luxury bag made of calfskin at a price of 1,800 euros in the shape of a chip bag and an actual plastic chip bag as the basis of aesthetic meaning production.

Applying the concept of aesthetic code-switching to the dynamic relationship between Balenciaga's high fashion products and Berghain's subcultural capital works both ways: the consumption of expensive designer pieces, often regarded as shallow and empty in itself, gains meaning through the added element of coolness and authenticity, of being knowledgeable enough to understand the reference. At the same time, the Berghain myth undoubtedly benefits from being associated with the elite sphere of high fashion. Actress Claire Danes famously performed a "techno dance" in the talk show "Ellen", as she gushed about her experience at Berghain. If one thing is true for both Berghain and Balenciaga is that they made sexual deviance consumable for a mainstream audience. If Berlin's unique selling point is to be the antithesis to Paris' old-money elegance, this begs the question if the original is as carefully constructed as its forgery by Balenciaga.

5 Subcultural Appropriation: Symbolic Spaces

In December 2021, the first Balenciaga boutique opened in Berlin, aptly described by the press as "a little Berghain on Ku'damm" (Röthig, 2021, para 1). Its minimalistic *beton brut* interior is in stark contrast to the stucco-laden exteriors of Berlin's most famous high fashion shopping street. But the similarities did not end there: following the boutique's opening, a line of eager shoppers formed outside, mostly young, mostly white, dressed in black, wearing wrap-around sunglasses and chunky sneakers, seamlessly interchangeable with the queue in front of Berghain a few hours later. As Anderson (2022) writes, the queue becomes a human extension of Berghain's concrete architecture spilling over into the urban space that surrounds it. But what do these semblances say about the deeper symbolic properties of each aesthetic field? What does the design of an interior space or the cut of a garment say about the social and emotional constitution of the people who are in them—in the space or in the garment?

One could argue that Berghain and the Balenciaga boutique are both elite spaces, albeit for different reasons. The legendarily strict Berghain's door plays a large part in the club's mystification. Anecdotes such as Elon Musk being denied entry during a visit to Berlin (Tsjeng, 2022) underline the idea that participation in the symbolic space of Berghain cannot be bought with economic capital alone. In contrast, everybody can visit the Balenciaga boutique on Ku'Damm; it is simply a store on a street full of stores. However, the goods offered there are so exorbitantly expensive that a large part of the population will never be able to afford them, making economic capital the most important precondition to truly participate in the symbolic label

world of Balenciaga as a customer. Yet, never afraid to sell out (another similarity to Berghain) Balenciaga offers a range of affordable, heavily branded products, such as sunglasses, caps and T-Shirts to ensure the visibility of the label even in non-elite circles.

But Demna's success as creative director of Balenciaga cannot simply be reduced to the commodification of subcultural dress codes. Being hailed as the "first designer to truly understand internet culture" (Eror, 2017, para. 3), the objects he creates require a high-level of pop cultural awareness, including subcultural fringes. By adding irony to the mix, Demna not only simultaneously mocks and serves the excess of the high fashion world, but also questions notions of originality and authenticity in a post-digital world of endless access to images, codes and symbols. He uses the idea of subculture and transforms it into a means of "counter-subversion to those in the know" (Eror, 2017, para. 8).

Following Nelson Goodman's (1967) concept of "worldmaking", aesthetic activity can be understood as "symbol processing; in inventing, applying, interpreting, transforming, manipulating symbols and symbol systems" (p. 12). It is these symbols, through which consumers enter into a relationship with their objects.

A simple black cap with embroidered Balenciaga logo holds arguably more meaning than a plain one, and a very different one from a black cap with, let's say, a Nike swoosh. Though the substitution of economic capital with subcultural capital as a strategy for the generation of status within the fashion world seems less revolutionary when considering the hefty price tags: while a plain black cap can be acquired for as low as 9.99 euros (asos.com), and a basic black Nike cap at 14,99 euros (nike.com), the cheapest black cap at Balenciaga costs 350 euros (balenciaga.com). Coolness as added value can by definition be seen as an appropriated property, in that it cannot be manufactured in a factory but is always borrowed from a wider cultural context (Verma, 2014). If Berghain provides the wider cultural context for the added value for Balenciaga's products, it can be noted that, but true to Bourdieu, economic capital still remains dominant (Bourdieu, 1986).

Like it or not, Demna has revolutionised the world of high fashion. Even after re-introduction of an haute-couture line in 2021 and his self-proclaimed emphasis on the "art of making clothes" (Davidson, 2013, para. 4) he continued to disrupt and disturb. His version of Balenciaga is a far cry from founder Cristobál Balenciaga's vision, who refused any licensing deals in his lifetime, stating: "I will not prostitute my art." (Fury, 2021, para. 1)

Today, Balenciaga is owned by the French luxury group Kering. Since Demna took over the creative direction of Balenciaga, the image of the brand as a whole has been completely reinvented. With his Instagram-ready blend of mock-authenticity and consumption critical irony, he allows luxury customers to spend large sums on garments that can be interpreted as a sign of protest or cultural decay. In 2014 trend forecaster Li Edelkoort famously predicted the "end of fashion", blaming so-

cial media and meme culture for the demise of fashion as a meaningful cultural genre (Edelkoort, 2014). Of course, This idea is not new either. As early as 1889, the British cultural critic Matthew Arnold published his book *Culture and Anarchy,* warning that the emerging mass culture potentially destroying the quality of elite cultural products (Arnold, 1889). Throughout the 20th century, Surrealists, Dadaists, and Pop artists challenged the conventions of high culture by placing everyday objects, including clothing, in institutional contexts of galleries or museums. It remains to be seen whether concepts such as ready-mades or appropriation art, already old hat in the art scene today, will prove to be permanently suitable for modernising the world of high fashion.

Meanwhile, the queue in front of Berghain is as long, and dressed in black, as ever. Rumours of an imminent closing of the club have been falsified for now. New young labels in the up-and-coming fashion city of Berlin like SF1OG, Gmbh or Richert Beil are gaining visibility with smaller, more sustainable collections that have three things in common: a preference for black, showing skin and fetish elements. Berlin-based fashion journalists Manual Almeida-Vergara and Franka Klaproth write that the city's designers now have to prove that they can do more than Berghain (Almeida-Vergara & Klaproth, 2023).

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