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‘Casually nonchalant – the styling of Giorgio Armani’

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Few fashion designers have paid such sustained attention to every detail of their business as Giorgio Armani, and one area where his scrutiny has been particularly intense is in the production of promotional images. Where others may prefer to hire a freelance stylist or art director, Mr Armani has frequently been directly involved. What has differentiated his styling from his contemporaries over the years has been its subtlety. Although carefully constructed, his images appear *unstyled.*

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In 1984 Armani introduced the first of a series of giant billboards on a large wall at the end of a block on Via Broletto in Milan. The *Emporio Armani* campaign image featured four businessmen, three seated, one standing. They are looking at newspapers, wearing identical light grey suits, yellow and red striped ties and black leather shoes. Although the message is intended to be read as corporate uniform, there are clues that inform passers-by that these are Armani men. The suits are loosely tailored and have even been lit to accentuate the creases and folds. The ribbed white socks worn by the models have been left to fall, crumpled around the ankles. Most of the promotional photography produced during the late-1970s and 1980s was styled by Giorgio Armani himself, and he was present on the set of all campaign shoots. From the outset, he was interested in *how* clothes were worn, not just the shapes of the garments themselves. The term ‘deconstructed’ is commonly used to describe Armani’s tailoring, and the same could perhaps be said of his approach to photographic styling. It has been claimed that in a photographer’s studio, his lack of concern with the formalities of styling clothes gave the resulting images a natural energy or realness, which the biographer Potvin has called a ‘casual nonchalance’.

Giorgio Armani is a *stilista* - a direct English translation of which would be stylist. However, there are historical differences and similarities between the role of the *stilista* and that of the stylist in British or American commercial contexts. In Italian fashion, the term became commonly used in tandem with the popularisation of ready-to-wear and was applied to distinguish between the designer of mass-produced clothing and that of the couturier. In UK and US fashion, the job description is now largely used for someone who works in the creation of image, who deals with ephemeral media rather than the design and production of clothing – they collaborate in the creation of advertising or editorial photography, or in the planning and organisation of catwalk events. Armani has performed the roles of stilista and stylist. He has designed the garments but has also been very much involved in the direction of the

photographic images that served to advertise these products. His working life began at the Italian department store La Rinascente where, from 1957, he was creative director for the window displays and a consultant for the store's buyers. He gained enough experience working with men's clothes that he took on a design role with Nino Cerruti, and it was Cerruti who first introduced Armani as 'my stilista.' He went on to perform this role in a freelance capacity for other designers, and continued to do so after launching his own, eponymous brand in 1975. He says that involvement in the marketing of the products and creation of brand identity was instinctive. He alleges that industry expectations when he started out were 'less formulaic', and this enabled him to develop his own methodologies and sidestep conventional practices. The installation of the billboard on via Brolletto, and the later introduction of *Emporio Armani* magazine were his own initiatives. He has maintained a focus on both the holistic value of advertising strategy and the minutiae of the images themselves.

The model Ben Shaul worked with Armani in the late 1980s. On one occasion, he joined Gina Di Bernardo for the photography of the Autumn/Winter 1989 men's and women's collections, which were to be shot by Aldo Fallai and shown together in a bound book. He still remembers the day clearly, particularly his hands-on approach: 'The beauty of Armani is his involvement. He had a mood board, and he had included body-language images for every single shot. He'd say, 'Could you sit like this?' and then he'd literally, with his fingers, come in and move my own fingers. He'd be adjusting the tiniest detail, you know, the movement of the lapel or the dent of the tie.' What is surprising about some of these images is the presence of decorative flourishes that seem foreign to the modernist, minimal aesthetic one associates with Mr Armani's designs. In one, Shaul is sat on a sofa draped in light grey woollen fabric, only a shade or two from the colour of the loose-fitting suit he is wearing. He has a grey overcoat draped over his right knee, and a scarf – again grey – slung around his neck. Unexpectedly, the grey tones are offset with a sliver of leopard-print fur. In another shot in the same series, the model is wearing the overcoat, this time over a charcoal-coloured sweater, with rolled-up flannel trousers and again, the leopard print fabric is evident. Asked to define his influences when constructing an image, Armani cites cinema as his primary source: 'Without a doubt, it is the silver screen that has inspired me most, especially the work of the Italian neorealists, whose use of lighting and black-and-white compositions has always created such a powerful atmosphere.' Perhaps surprisingly, he also references artists whose use of colour and pattern is less of an obvious match with his own aesthetic, namely Giorgio Morandi, Leon Bakst and the Ballets Russes, Paul Gauguin and Henri Matisse.

Even so, he claims he initially drew inspiration from ordinary people rather than Hollywood icons. He says his original muses worked in artistic fields and had a more imaginative approach to dressing themselves. He was interested in art directors and photographers, with people who had adopted unconventional, individualistic styles: 'They

used to wear old clothes – their dad's or even their granddad's clothes, with a very worn, lived-in look. Indeed, my first clients were intellectuals who found in my designs something they were used to already. And afterwards, other professionals came along. People who weren't concerned with fashion, who didn't have creative jobs, but appreciated this as a new way of conceiving fashion and tailoring.' He of course became more commonly known for his transformation of corporate dress. He relaxed the dress code of the businessman but also contributed to the uniform of the 'working woman' of the 1980s. Armani's casual conservatism in some ways reflects the culture of Milanese fashion. The Milanese sociologist Paolo Volonté explains that, despite being the home of Fashion Week, and of the editorial offices of many Italian fashion publications, the city's strength in the fashion system is not *creative* styling. He has interviewed many stylists in his hometown but notes that most successful Italian stylists and photographers are based in Paris or New York and that, conversely, Italian brands often employ foreign talent to produce their campaigns. He acknowledges a feeling of provincialism among those working in the media industries in Milan and has found that stylists working in the city are more likely to be involved in the advertising of, what he calls, 'ordinary', mass market fashion than the innovative campaigns or editorial produced elsewhere.

The 1980s was the moment when the freelance stylist's role started to be recognised in the production of fashion photography. In the UK the stylist's prominence developed in conjunction with the emergence of independent, 'style-press' publishing and the extreme forms of styling seen in London club and on its streets. Consequently, the looks being shown on the pages of British magazines were blatantly 'styled' – they combined clothing, accessories and found objects to build an extreme visual statement. Armani's discreet visual language could be considered at odds with this trend. Nevertheless, towards the end of the decade, the format of his campaign imagery would draw comparisons with new, narrative styles seen in the pages of European magazines, particularly those targeting male consumers. The stylist David Bradshaw says that the launch of *Emporio Armani* magazine in the late 1980s served to reinforce Armani's relevance, as a designer but also as an imagemaker: 'There was nowhere near as much imagery around then as today, particularly advertising. But Armani was part of my consciousness back then. It was when I was first getting active as a stylist, when I was first becoming aware of imagery, powerful imagery.' Bradshaw started his career with *Arena* magazine, after its launch in 1987, and went on to collaborate with a succession of designers. *Emporio Armani* magazine was launched the following year, at the same time as *Per Lui* in Italy. These new publications sought to address the apparent emergence of the 'new man', of a more sensitive version of masculinity and – significantly - a new type of consumer.

Androgyny is a term frequently used to describe Armani, but arguably the emphasis throughout the first issue of magazine is on styling a diverse range of masculinities. The female models have cropped hair and angular jawlines; they wear loosely fitting men's shirts, suit

jackets and blousons. Where there is a comparison with the photography in *Arena* at that time is in the presentation of men as objects of desire, as sex objects. Often shirtless, or with muscled chests rippling under open suit jackets, the male models in *Emporio Armani* magazine are styled to make the reader aware of their bodies. Again, it is not what they are wearing, but how it is worn. Armani asserts that he has always been attuned to the physicality of the people I was photographing, both men and women. 'My clothes,' he says, 'are designed to be fluid and to complement the body rather than obscuring or overwhelming it. I have always sought to dress models in a way that expresses the form beneath and suggests an idea of movement.'

Mr Armani entrusted his sister Rosanna with art direction of the magazine, and progressively he has passed on other responsibilities to others. Rosanna took his place at the shoots. More recently, he has allowed the photographers' chosen stylists to handle the styling of his own advertising, though he always gives clear instructions on how he wants the outfits to look. When he hands over clothing for other stylists to use for magazine shoots, he says there are no fixed rules but hopes they would respect the values of the brand: 'Stylists should feel free to interpret the collections in their own way. The Armani vision is rooted in timeless elegance, and I would hope that they are mindful of this. But I am always curious to see how someone interprets elegance in a way I had not anticipated.'

One thing he still does himself, however, is style the shows, and he says it remains one of the parts he enjoys the most. Bradshaw emphasises the notoriety of the Armani shows and flags that they are an aspect of Armani's image-making that is often not given as much credence as his design work or the styling of his photographic campaigns. However, the uniformity of method and restraint in the messaging are, he says, comparable: 'They're notorious for their scale. You know, if you go to a Prada show you have no idea what Rem Koolhaas is going to do with that space. But with Armani there's a consistency to it because it's always in the same space. You know you are going to be sat pretty much in the same seat season on season. And they're never going to change that environment much. And it's going to be the longest show of the week. But I've never found them boring or monotonous. They're relentless, but they're relentlessly chic, relentlessly powerful, and relentlessly Armani.' His meticulousness has also been applied to the casting and direction of the models for a show. The reflections of Dalma Callado on her experiences of walking for Armani's mirror those of Ben Shaul's. She describes how he expected nuance and subtlety. He strove for a certain type of naturalism in the model's behaviour but would police a catwalk show with the same level of analysis as a photographic shoot: 'He knows exactly what he wants, absolutely. I mean the *details*. And he wants you to be exactly that, but you can't be like a robot. Sometimes everything is on the eyes, it's just on the expression.'

The fashion historian Caroline Evans has claimed that in contemporary fashion, the image is no longer representation but ‘frequently the commodity itself’ and Armani’s understanding of this was clear from the moment he started his brand. He understood his market – both gay and straight men - and knew how far he could tweak the possibilities of contemporary menswear in a way that seduced without alienating or confusing them. Of his first experience of being styled by Armani, it was the choice of footwear that shocked Ben Shaul. He had never considered wearing white socks with a suit. The design language of European menswear had drawn on such a limited sartorial vocabulary through the twentieth century that even a slight deviance from the norm could be seen as significant. Bradshaw says the visual language of Armani’s advertising is, despite its restraint, easy to recognise: ‘If an image was placed in front of me without a credit on it and I was asked to name the brand. I think it wouldn't take me long. Even if that identity is a little quieter, or seems a little quieter amongst all the screaming and shouting that goes on in a fashion image these days, it maintains a relevance. A quiet but powerful relevance.’ A casual nonchalance.