ANNA MANZATO*

THE CANON OF STYLE
Fashion in Factual Entertainment

Abstract
In recent years factual entertainment has gained space on Italian television, especially on ‘native digital’ channels such as Real Time, DMAX, La7d and La5. Ordinary people are the main characters in stories that often adopt the makeover format and deal with everyday life, from the home to cooking, from DIY to personal fitness. In this context, fashion occupies a privileged position. This article aims to analyse current examples of fashion factual entertainment in Italy, elaborating on the discursive practices and the thematization of the fashion object. In particular, it investigates the televisual apparatus and the role played by audiences. In doing so, it explores the discursive practices used to deal with fashion content (e.g. divulgation or imposition of a dress code, testimonies, suggestions and lessons) suggesting that the presence of experts and learners in these programmes seems to represent fashion as a space for the negotiation of experience. Yet, as the analysis will show, the idea of fashion that emerges is that of a set of rules rather than a reappraisal of individual competence, thus leading to a stereotypical canon to which the audience should conform.

Keywords
Factual entertainment; fashion; discursive construction of style; performative role of television; audience performance.

After spending years in beating celebrities, in my programme
I decided to test common people.
Giusi Ferrè, Buccia di banana

I. ORDINARY TELEVISION

Since the switch to the digital terrestrial signal was completed in 2012, many new channels on Italian television have emerged, which – like Real Time, DMAX, La5, and La7d – have focused their programming on ordinary people. Italian television programmes have increasingly revolved around one or more characters and their real-life stories. From long-running shows such as Forum and Uomini e Donne, to more recent examples such as Italia’s Got Talent, television seems to have become more and more ordinary, leading to a circulation of discourses about lifestyles and aesthetic tastes1.

* International University of Languages and Media IULM, Milan – anna.manzato@iulm.it.
The factual television genre is the one that best represents this situation. This genre refers broadly to all that is non-fiction, thus encompassing various sub-genres as an umbrella category. Based on everyday situations, it is characterized by the staging of real people paired with an entertainment component. Today, the term ‘factual’ has come to define a broad range of programmes where factuality assumes a ‘soft’ connotation, also defined as popular factual. Due also to the low economic cost, this genre has spread into various kinds of features, from tutorials to docu-realities, thus encompassing several types of mise en scene. Topics range from home furnishings to cooking, from DIY to personal fitness, from weddings to make-up, together with more unusual themes like strange diseases, dog training or delivery room births.

Drawing from documentary and reality shows as well, factual explores the diverse nuances of everyday life, thus showing a general process of television’s ‘de-artificialization’, the expression of an evolution in television practices regarding both the language and the way audiences are involved. In regard to the former, factual may be seen as deriving from the observational documentary, developed as first-person storytelling. As for the latter, the live take on reality developed through real stories, which has already been attempted by reality television and its several spin-offs, marks ordinary people as protagonists. Audiences thus take their rightful place as actors of communication, the object and focus of the discourse, which had already occurred with the reality genre.

It is worth noting that on English-speaking television, particularly British television, factual often overlaps with lifestyle programmes, which have a long history in BBC broadcasting. Lifestyle television gives suggestions and teachings about everyday life, thus posing itself as an ‘utility television' with a demiurgic function: from gardening to child education, from personal style to cooking, lifestyle television – and factual as well – couples the spectacle of the real with a pedagogic intent, leading the audience to gain competences and skills that regard the various aspects of everyday life.

Starting with recent examples of Italian television scheduling, the following paragraphs will take into consideration a specific type of factual entertainment, a type that is explicitly dedicated to female audiences and to a specific theme of the factual genre pertaining to fashion. The selection of the programmes is based on their significance regarding the actors’ roles, their mutual relationships, and how knowledge about fashion is distributed among them. Discursive practices and thematization processes will be explored to highlight the kind of styles that are proposed, the function played by the television medium in conveying fashion content, the role played by the audiences and, finally, the connotation of fashion that emerges from these programmes.

2. Fashion Factual: Structure and Actors

In factual entertainment about fashion, primarily two kinds of programmes can be found: one that can be ascribed to the general makeover category, and one that merges factual with the game show genre.

---


2.1. Fashion makeover

In makeover shows, also called ‘coaching’, ordinary people are assisted in a lifestyle project by presenters/experts; the core of these programmes is a transformation process which takes places in front of the cameras. So the typical narrative structure is a three-step plot: it starts with a need, the central and most important part deals with change and improvement, and this is followed by a final celebration of success.

The most popular fashion makeover in Italy, Ma come ti vesti?! (MCTV) clearly presents this structure: the first sequences show the relatives or friends of a woman calling for help due to her lack of style; the hosts, Enzo Miccio and Carla Gozzi, come to the rescue, scrutinizing her wardrobe and giving advice (“never again with” and “never again without”, according to the woman’s physical structure and the different occasions for use) for a shopping session. In the final part, the ‘new her’ appears on a catwalk and then she meets relatives and friends who happily greet her and celebrate her successful transformation. Everything is performed according to the “rules of good taste and elegance”, explicitly stressing the power of makeovers: “will you perform a miracle?”, “you pulled a new person out of me”.

A similar structure can be found in Guardaroba perfetto (GP), also hosted by Carla Gozzi. As the programme website states, the stylist runs to help “desperate friends in need of advice regarding style […] women who, afraid to make a mistake, remain attached to the same old clothes, even though their wardrobes have some high-potential pieces that they would never dare to wear”.

In these examples, what clearly emerges is a training process which leads women to possess the expertise which they would otherwise lack. The expert’s role is clearly crucial: he is described as a “mythical hero”, the centre of the transformation process, who not so implicitly takes a position of superiority and may often mock the participants for their stylistic blunders. As the participants testify with their own words, the expert is positioned, both linguistically and structurally, as a bearer of practical knowledge and aesthetic judgement. And his knowledge can be spread around, leading women “from an original and unsatisfactory state, to something more desirable and new”.

The medium’s performing role is quite apparent: television presents itself as an apparatus capable of making something happen – in this specific case, a change in style. Embodied in the two coaches, the medium appears to possess a problem-solving, practical knowledge which ordinary people may refer to in order to respond to shortcomings and doubts; in this case, common people ask questions which can only be answered thanks to the experts’ specific abilities, and thus have their look ‘rescued’, once and for all.

---

7 Real Time, prime time, 2008- (Magnolia). The programme is based on the BBC format What Not to Wear.
8 Real Time, afternoon slot, 2012-2013 (Magnolia).
2.2. Fashion games

In other examples, the topic of style and fashion is also explored by adopting the typical entertainment mechanism of the game show. In fact, some programmes based on the transformation mechanism exploit competition between participants in order to add a further entertainment element. This is the case with *Shopping Night*\(^{12}\). Four participants, described on the programme website as fashion victims, have to find the most suitable look for a specific occasion that’s indicated by the hosts – from a rock concert to New Year festivities –, by choosing from all the garments found in a department store. The winner will be the woman who, according to the hosts, has chosen the most suitable style and has demonstrated that she “possesses taste, style and a fashion sense”; “now shopping no longer holds any secrets for you, but only certainties”, – remark the hosts – “go and conquer the world of fashion”. As in the previous programmes, the basic assumption is a codified know-how concerning fashion that is embodied by the two hosts, and which the participants must prove to possess. Therefore the narrative development progresses as a testing ground for the protagonists’ specific skills.

*Buccia di banana* (BDB)\(^{13}\), hosted by fashion reporter Giusi Ferrè, has a similar layout. In this case as well, we have a competition: two couples of stylists, Roberta and Antonio Murr, and Matteo Osso and Julie Kosossey, set out to renew the style of the two ‘buccé’ (literally banana skins, or slip-ups), to turn them into ‘tocco di classe’ (a touch of class)\(^{14}\). The most successful transformation, according to the host, wins the episode.

The show is strongly characterised by the host’s personality and her role as a fashion journalist: there is an alternation of clips in which Giusi Ferrè examines the looks of celebrities, remarking on their style and explaining the vocabulary of fashion. Alongside the stylists another protagonist is then added, who is knowledgeable about the game of style and elegance. At the end we see the two protagonists entering the studio parading before the host with their new looks, with alternating images of before and after, until the crucial question is asked: “How do you feel after this transformation?”. The final judgement determines which of the two couples of stylists have better succeeded in bringing to the fore not only a new look, but also a hidden personality trait of the protagonist. In essence, style is personality: “Fashion passes, style remains”.

A similar structure can be found in *Tacco 12! Si nasce* (T12)\(^{15}\), where the three protagonists are self-defined ‘shoe addicts’ who have to find the best match between clothes and shoes given a specific style, and in *Voglio essere così* (VEC)\(^{16}\), which mixes the makeover plot with a game: the programme’s promo says: “change yourselves with style”.

The storytelling is interspersed with statements from the participants who describe their choices during the shopping session, and the jury members’ remarks about them; the jury members often refer to the looks of actresses and rock stars, and constantly repeat certain rules (“short and body-hugging is not suitable for a sexy-elegant occasion”). After having completed their outfit with make-up and hairdo, the participants are ready

---

\(^{12}\) Real Time, Prime Time, 2011-2015 (Magnolia). The programme, also broadcast in Great Britain with the title *Shopping Night UK*, is hosted again by Enzo Miccio and Carla Gozzi.

\(^{13}\) Lei, prime time, re-run for La7d, 2010-2013 (Magnolia).

\(^{14}\) “Buccia di banana” and “Tocco di classe” are the titles of two columns written by Giusi Ferrè for the women’s magazine *Io Donna* of *Corriere della Sera*, where celebrities style slip-ups are scrutinised along with their correct choices.

\(^{15}\) La5, afternoon slot, 2013-2015 (Libero).

\(^{16}\) La5, afternoon slot, 2015 (Inmedia), with Cristina Chiabotto, Miss Italia 2004 and showgirl, as host.
for judgement: the host asks “Have they reached their goals? How did they manage to get rid of their old looks?”.

3. THE CANON OF STYLE

Starting with the examples above, a first set of considerations may be presented concerning the functions played by the apparatus and the audience in the fashion factual: how do the television medium and the female protagonists present themselves? Which mutual roles do they take on?

Factual TV, in particular in the form of makeovers, has been said to be based on the medium’s performative role. The narrative mechanism is therefore focused on solving a problem and changing the initial situation that is presented at the start. The goal consists in giving style to someone who totally lacks it (MCTV), or exploiting the unexpressed potential of one’s wardrobe to the utmost (GP). Even in programmes adopting the game module, the core of the storytelling still coincides with an acquisition process to make up for a failure (BBB), or to prove one’s ability to follow fashion rules by successfully passing a proposed test (SN, VEC, T12). In all these cases the television apparatus can be seen as a sort of helper in a situation of loss, thus turning from a medium representing reality to a medium which “makes something happen”.

Narrative mechanisms show how “reality” can be changed by starting precisely with TV and its actions: in this way television presents itself as an expert that enters people’s everyday lives “no longer with the aim of telling stories or seizing show opportunities, but to steer people towards a lifestyle”[17].

If the apparatus appears to be something that possesses know-how about fashion and highlights the protagonists’ errors and choices, the audience becomes the protagonist of the storytelling with the reality genre first, and the factual later on, and thus ends up playing a double role, sometimes as learners and sometimes as experts. If the focus of makeovers is to compensate for a lack (MCTV, GP), and is frequently accompanied by scathing remarks and overstatements, during fashion games protagonists will often state their passion for fashion and shopping in an attempt at self-preservation, thus exhibiting a presumed knowledge that will be put to the test by the judges. It is therefore the apparatus which holds the knowledge, is the yardstick on which the protagonists’ style will be measured, and the participants’ choices judged – either positively or negatively.

Finally, how can fashion be defined in fashion factuals? And what functions does the television medium play in conveying its contents? A first dimension refers to popularization: experts embody a knowledge which is conveyed under several forms, from “never again with” and “never again without” in MCTV, to references to style icons like in VEC. What emerges is a style manual, ready to be applied in all its multifaceted features, which the participants must comply with if they want to win the judges’ approval. The connotation of the fashion universe being staged by the factual therefore refers more to a canon than to a personal appropriation of rules, thus showing “the pragmatic overlapping of the idea of style with the idea of rule and code. […] What is being conveyed is the idea of dressing and propriety, not fashion and a complex system of references”[18].


Fashion appears in these examples not so much as an innovation of taste and individual appropriation, but rather as a means to impose a code that is rooted in common sense (the dos and don’ts, the reference to style icons belonging to the universe of popular culture). Even when, as in the case of fashion games, the protagonists initially display an individual competence, this is constantly tested against a system of rules which must be complied with for the final outcome. As such, rather than being a convergence and a mix between the canon and an individual and experimental appropriation through style, fashion in factual seems to be a pre-ordained structure embodied in the figures of the coach and judges, whose dressing rules should be followed if one wants to be assessed positively.

In this sense, the dramaturgy of before/after leads to a normative action which promises re-education and rescue. Hence fashion becomes practical knowledge, normalized through the lens of entertainment. Although it takes the shape of an experiential space for common women, the whole picture actually outlines a conformation to codified rules. Presented, especially in makeover shows, as a tool for personal evolution achieved through aesthetic and emotional training, the mechanism of transformation results in a codified formula: “only one rule: good taste” (T12).

4. The discourse of fashion

In the examples above, fashion is thematised as a core element of female discourses. Channels which host the programmes are directed to a female audience, thus centering their scheduling around specific women’s tastes and needs. And each channel reflects itself in the way programmes talk to their audience through the experts: a sort of ‘aggressive’ approach for a young women target (Real Time: see the often sarcastic style of Enzo Miccio and Carla Gozzi), or a smart approach, again for young women (La5: see the ‘pop’ style of the T12 and VEC hosts), or a more confidential tone for a more mature target (Lei: see the empathetic figure of Giusi Ferrè).

The common trend among these approaches lies in the discursive elements which recur in the programmes, firstly, the focus on learning: style can be taught, as the experts testify. A further aspect regards the element of a test which women have to undergo in order to gain a positive assessment. Finally, the overall narrative dynamic shows an inevitable ending in achievement: a fashion canon can be learnt, showing the proper competences and thus gaining a satisfying solution. The experts’ role in fashion discourse appears to be key, offering a righteous direction towards a solid, testified feminine competence: fashion appears in factual entertainment as a peculiar response to women’s need for taste.