

Virgil Abloh's Contemporary Discourse: An Academic Approach to His Communication Strategies



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Abstract This paper aims to document Virgil Abloh's approach to fashion through his own words. Abloh defines himself as an engineer, architect, DJ, and designer, thus embodying the figure of the interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary contemporary artist. Since he built his luxury streetwear brand on social media and worked his way up until being named Louis Vuitton's menswear creative director in 2018, he has challenged the structure of the fashion industry on many levels. Therefore, he is loved and criticized by many in equal parts, and his story has problematized how fashion is defined and understood today. Still, it is his views on design, education, and social justice that characterize him. Consequently, it is by examining his career path through his design work, exhibitions, lectures, and media coverage—which will be treated as primary sources of study—that this paper takes an in-depth look into his creative process and the intentions, hopes, and mission behind it. Ultimately, Virgil Abloh will be considered in this paper as a contemporary phenomenon whose work and words can help understand how fashion communication works today, being the final purpose of this paper to contribute to the consolidation of fashion studies as an academic field.

Keywords Virgil Abloh · Fashion communication · Interdisciplinary · Contemporary fashion

1 Introduction

Virgil Abloh is a contemporary character whose role in today's fashion scene is relevant: he is currently the creative director for Louis Vuitton's men's collections, while he continues to be Off-White's chief executive officer. Abloh is also a

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graduated architect and a self-proclaimed artist *lato sensu* thus embodying the postmodern approach to art and culture. He is usually featured in magazines and fashion media, but he has also been an invited lecturer at the Royal College of Art and the protagonist of a solo exhibition in the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago. Therefore, Abloh is a multilayered character that will be framed in this work within the notion of the “contemporary phenomenon,” understood as the extraordinary event happening now, and whose complexity merits consideration.

Fashion is also a contemporary phenomenon, and this may be one of the reasons why fashion studies still have trouble being depicted as a legitimate academic field of knowledge. This research aims to fulfill a research gap in fashion studies by elaborating an academic approach to Virgil Abloh’s work and personality through the study of his communication strategies, because, unlike other big fashion players, Abloh is very open about the concepts and stories behind his collections and artworks. However, this research also wishes to contribute to the consolidation of fashion and fashion communication as an academic field.

This study wants to document Abloh’s intentions underlying his discourses to understand his creative process and analyze his language when communicating his artistic vision on fashion, art, and culture. Since this is shaping a new cultural identity within the spheres of contemporary fashion and design, this research aims for Virgil Abloh to become a subject of academic consideration.

2 Methodology

Fashion studies require an interdisciplinary methodological approach due to the very nature of the subject [1]. Virgil Abloh also embodies this interdisciplinary nature, which means that different methodological approaches have been necessary to understand and document Abloh’s discourses and design practices. Due to the lack of academic essays on Virgil Abloh and his work, the researchers have utilized Abloh’s personal websites, social media profiles, interviews, significant media publications, lectures, and an exhibition catalog as primary sources of investigation. Discourse analysis of these communication strategies has therefore proven to be the best research method to analyze Abloh’s perspective on his own work, the fashion system, and the larger social and cultural context.

Virgil Abloh is aware that artistic movements and fashion trends have an ending; he also believes that the only way to avoid that is through documental materials. Interviews, lectures, Instagram posts, or exhibitions in museums, among others, become Abloh’s documental materials that keep his designs and vision alive. In this paper, they will be considered as oral, visual, and material primary sources that set the context for an ethnographic approach to Virgil Abloh’s discourses and works. Following Abloh’s terminology, they are “archive proof” [2].

3 Virgil by Virgil, or How to Construct the Self through Discourse(S)

Coco Chanel created a myth around her biography. Virgil Abloh is quite the opposite: the story of his life constitutes an articulate and truthful speech that he repeats in all his communications. Abloh's situational and socio-cultural context can be understood through his websites. Located at the top of his page *canary---yellow*, a brief biography of him specifies his birthplace (Rockford, Illinois, 1980), studies (degree in Civil Engineering from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and master's degree in Architecture at the Illinois Institute of Technology), and his training in the Bauhaus principles, which "fused with contemporary culture, make up Abloh's interdisciplinary practice today" [3]. In addition to this presentation, he introduces the concept of inclusivity and his philanthropic approach on his other website virgilabloh.com [4].

Both descriptions might obey to an attempt to legitimize his work in relation to his origins and training. By emphasizing his training with the Mies van der Rohe curriculum, he justifies his interdisciplinary understanding of fashion and architecture. Similarly, the mention of his humble origins might endorse him in his activist and altruistic approach to fashion and design.

3.1 Virgil Abloh's Creative Process and the Activism Behind His Designs

Virgil Abloh has been openly communicating and disclosing his creative process in academic lectures, panels, and numerous interviews. It is himself through his own words who guides his public into his world by sharing his vision and aspirations and showcasing his creative process. He focuses on his work as a multidisciplinary designer with references to music, art, and architecture. Therefore, these lectures are rich primary sources for understanding Abloh as a cultural phenomenon.

It was in Harvard's School of Design lecture titled "Insert Complicated Title Here" where Virgil revealed his "Personal Design Language." Drawing from his iPhone Notes—his working tool—he deconstructs his creative methodologies and elaborates a list of seven "organizing principles" or "cheat codes" that gives the audience the keys to understand his work [5]. They are the following: (1) readymade (a new idea based on recognizable parts of human emotion, irony); (2) "figures of speech" or "the quotes"; (3) 3% approach; (4) a compromise between two distinct similar or dissimilar notions; (5) signs of "work in progress" (again human interaction); (6) a societal commentary: has a reason to exist now; and (7) speaking to the tourist and purist simultaneously. In his lectures, he shows them numbered as showed here, but he tends to compose his speech by intertwining them to offer a comprehensive and educational discourse to his audience.

Therefore, an essential part of this design process is communication. In his lectures, he speaks ironically and uses humor to connect with humanity (“you open up when you laugh”). He does so by using quotes—written in Helvetica font for his fascination with modernist design—to speak figuratively. For example, when he writes “SCULPTURE” in an Off-White bag, he questions the very nature of the object and challenges our understanding of art.

But the influence of Marcel Duchamp in Abloh’s work surpasses the use of irony. The Duchamp-inspired notion that “an artist overthought the game, understood the parameters, provided something provocative, something that became a launchpad for other forms of art” [6] becomes Virgil’s *modus operandi*: his designs are meant to be functional and to have a purpose. Off-White was born following this idea, meaning that his brand was meant to be the platform from which he could bring life to other projects. Even the brand’s name obeys this Duchampian ethos of provocation and game: Off-White is not black, nor white, yet every possibility in between. This gives him the creative freedom to explore and introduce himself in different industries and disciplines and helps him problematize the idea of originality. He knows it is impossible to create something new; instead, he prefers to collaborate, reference, take elements from the past, and give them the “Off-white” balance—the “ready-made” of Duchamp [7]. He followed this method in his first individual project, PYREX VISION, where he stamped Caravaggio’s *Deposition* (1600–1604) under the title “PYREX 23,” a homage to Michael Jordan’s basketball number, on a hoodie. It is a high-culture artistic reference impregnated with street style coming from Jordan, basketball, and the sweatshirt.

This compromise between two different concepts also defines his own audience: the “Purist” and the “Tourist.” The “Purist” is the one who finds value in essence and meaning; the “Tourist” is someone with curiosity, a generation of people eager to learn. This slogan, “Tourist vs Purist,” was last displayed in his Louis Vuitton Autumn Winter 21 fashion show written in the bags. He aims to attract the tourists that do not see themselves in institutions to his fashion brand to challenge the traditional fashion system. In that sense, Abloh reinterprets Entwistle and Rocamora’s [8] definition of the insider-outsider logic that defines the field of fashion and associates the tourist with the outsider, that is, Abloh himself. Therefore, the Louis Vuitton director considers himself, paradoxically, an outsider in the fashion field that wants to open the doors of the world of fashion to others like him and challenge the established model.

Tired of perfection, he applies the 3% approach to design, where he only edits things slightly thus allowing himself to remain a multidisciplinary artist and work on multiple projects simultaneously (Off-White, Nike, Ikea, Louis Vuitton). He puts into practice the “Domino Effect” to concatenate projects [9] while always speaking publicly about his logic of operation. In consequence, he constructs his body of work with two main purposes: to build a large body of work that lasts through time as a reflection of the zeitgeist and to communicate and inspire his community (both African-American and streetwear, many times joined).

Virgil Abloh always acknowledges his background, the support from his community through every obstacle (from his parents, the streetwear community, or

Kanye West [10]), and he continues that legacy supporting them and the new generations. He always refers to his team as mentors and collaborators, not interns or employees.

Therefore, Abloh thinks of his achievements as the success of his community. He built his brand out of social media, and he was appointed Louis Vuitton's menswear artistic director in March 2020, which were both considered a moment "belief" [11]: what he thought was impossible became possible as he was the first African-American designer to hold that position in the 164 years of the LVMH brand, and one of the few designers of color to helm a major fashion house. From there on, his mission is to keep the door open for other young black designers and creatives.

Along these lines and following George Floyd's death in May, his empowerment to the African-American community became more than a philanthropist mission. Abloh, aware of his powerful platform, intensified his public comments criticizing the racial prejudice still existing today. He shared messages on social media, participated in panels, and focused his last conferences at the Royal College of Art and in Chicago in 2020 on ways to improve the system and find tangible solutions through dialogue and youth education. He then encouraged students to fight systemic racism through their studies and work by learning: "You have to know better to do better" [12].

The consequence of these events was the announcement of the creation of scholarships for young black artists, with the name of "Post-Modern," managed in partnership with the Fashion Scholarship Fund. With this scholarship, he wanted "to foster equity and inclusion within the fashion industry by providing scholarships to students of academic promise of Black, African-American, or African descent" [13], not only by giving them funds but most importantly, by supporting them with vital career services and mentoring. With the help of his partners (Nike, Evian, and even Louis Vuitton), he raised 1\$ million.

In addition, he launched "Free game," a free digital resource that continues the commitment of the "Post-modern" scholarship foundation and provides mentorship to young black designers and those who come from non-traditional backgrounds and yet still being open to anyone to advance on the path of building their brands. This is a step-by-step program where Abloh altruistically shares the notions and tools he used to build his career, from online talks to tutorials [14].

These last projects are the result of years of inclusion and philanthropy across the different disciplines he has worked. They can be found in the digital archive, his websites, being virgilabloh.com probably the most complete. This display shows Virgil's transparency and willingness to educate by sharing. As he said in one of his lectures, it is his "democratic duty" to do this "reverse education," to educate through his work [9].

Virgil Abloh has become a reference for future generations of all races, colors, and social backgrounds. In today's massified and digitalized world, his positive educational message, encouraging young people to look at the world from a designer's point of view and to foster their curiosity, stands out. By not conforming to a system and "question(ing) everything," he encourages global change by fostering interdisciplinary thinking and teamwork.

Even though he considers himself “an eternal student,” he more so becomes a mentor, a professor, to the younger generations that look up to him. “The idea is to teach my demographic [...] I want to put culture on a track so that it becomes more inclusive, more open source. And then give kids the chance to ride in the express lane” [15].

4 Virgil by Others: Artistic Collaborations and Incursions into High and Popular Culture

Virgil Abloh has been working on several large-scale projects with social and cultural impact simultaneously for either Off-White or Louis Vuitton. In 2018, his brand’s success was recorded in The Lyst Index for popular fashion brands: “Off-White™ is officially the hottest brand on the planet [...] now surpassing Gucci and Balenciaga at the top of the table for the first time” [16].

However, Abloh does not seem satisfied with the prestige and validation that the fashion sector provides, with all its network of models, celebrities, and fashion journalists. He goes further obeying his vision of fashion considering it a phenomenon that allows the communication of ideas and the exploration of other territories, apart from an object of consumption. By using his own references and values, he places his narrative in other spheres that elevate his status and make him more popular.

Virgil Abloh has hence managed to take his speech to prestigious academic institutions, where he has exposed his design vision and fashion convictions. In most of his appearances, he exposes his narrative and creative process to the public honestly and plainly. Nevertheless, Abloh’s natural discourse must not be misunderstood as a nonchalant attitude toward academia. All his scholarly encounters appear on their multiple websites and biographical notes whether they are conversations, interviews, or keynote conferences certifying the designer’s pride with them.

The first academic conference that appears on his website dates from 2017 and was at Columbia University, entitled “Everything In Quotes.” This was followed by the Rhode Island University (titled “Theoretically Speaking”) and the Harvard Graduate School of Design (entitled “Insert Complicated Title Here” and later published as a book: *The Incidents*). In 2019, he lectured in conversation with Hamza Walker the fine arts master students in his city of origin for the Art Institute Chicago. Finally, he held three online conferences in 2020 due to the global pandemic situation at the Royal College of Art in London (“A Lecture on Potential Solutions: Ideas on Race in Areas of Art, Design, and Current Based on Past Experiences”), in Chicago to talk about his scholarship “Post-Modern” (“A Lecture on Potential Solutions”) and at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in China (“Art, Fashion, and Brandings Contribution to Society in a Post-Covid 19 Environment”).

The perception of a designer as a wise and cultured man is not new. Before Vigil Abloh, other fashion designers have entered scholar institutions. For example,

Christian Dior was invited by the University of the Sorbonne in 1955 to participate in a summer seminar dedicated to the "French Civilization," where he gave his first lecture in dialogue with Professor Jacqueline de Menou. They were both seeking prestige from the scholar community when making those forays into higher education. Similarly, it can be stated that Abloh has an interest in placing his fashion in the framework of art seeking validation and prestige.

Abloh's personality is defined by his multidisciplinary character that plays with the seriousness of his conferences in academic institutions and the streetwear essence in his collections. However, he seems determined to show that his ideas and works are serious, and his references are culturally loaded implying a transcendent meaning to everything he does. Following this purpose, he has succeeded in associating his creative work with the art world by participating in several art exhibitions in emblematic spaces such as the Kreo Gallery in Paris or the Twentythirtyfive installation that Vitra carried out in July 2019 at the Vitra Campus Fire Station in Weil am Rhein.

The solo exhibition held at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago in 2019 was Abloh's highest achievement up to this day in the domain of art. It would be tempting to think that the exhibition was a consequence of his entry into the world of luxury and high fashion. However, as stated in the exhibition catalog with the eponymous title published by Del Monico Books, Prestel, and MCAC publications, the idea arose much earlier. Michael Darling, curator, and ideologist of the "Virgil Abloh: Figures of Speech" exhibition confirms that it took three years to carry out the research, documentation, and curation processes [17]. Consequently, Virgil Abloh entered the museum for all projects and products developed prior to his position at Louis Vuitton.

It is curious that the MCAC, a well-known institution in the contemporary art world, decides to dedicate one of its temporary exhibitions to a character who does not belong to the art world—in the traditional sense of the term. As Darling himself acknowledged in an informal telephonic conversation on the topic, Abloh had not yet reached the peak of his career when he suggested the idea of the exhibition to him. Despite this, Darling proposed it and Abloh accepted: "It is the art critic within me who led me to think about this exhibition. I wanted to do my job and let history do his" [18]. Darling is talking here about Abloh's future entry into the annals of fashion and art history.

However, the exhibition's curator casual approach to the MCAC exhibition contrasts with Abloh's response to Darling's invitation: "All the work I've been doing so far has been to attract the attention of a curator of exhibitions in order to enter an art museum" [9, 17]. Virgil Abloh is aware of the museum's capacity—understood as an institution of the art world—to validate, add prestige, and promote the work of any artist or creative [19]. Entering the museum means for Abloh the validation of his status as an interdisciplinary artist and creator, at the same time that he validates his work and his approach to arts and design.

"Virgil Abloh: Figures of Speech" is a fashion exhibition in a contemporary art museum. Abloh's satisfaction on entering the museum as a medium for gaining prestige and validation can be explained by the power relations that exist between art

and fashion: “As fashion seeks to attach itself to the value system of art, so art seeks to remove the stigma of such associations” [19, 448]. Fashion, that is to say, the facet of creative director of Off-White and Louis Vuitton, is the one that needs the prestige that art confers, while art benefits from the commercial nature of fashion and imports the values of fashion to the museum [20]. This tension does not seem to worry Virgil Abloh; on the contrary, it reaffirms him as a postmodern and interdisciplinary artist.

Along these lines, it is revealing that the artistic context that he chooses as the setting for his presentations is the contemporary pop aesthetic of Takashi Murakami as reflected in the joint work of LV’s last traveling parade in Tokyo. Murakami is an acclaimed artist for his ability to combine fine art and popular culture. Similarly, Abloh is also very comfortable creating where art, fashion, and commerce meet.

4.1 Virgil as Portrayed in the Media: From Veneration to Veiled Criticism

Since his beginnings in the fashion industry, probably after that Tommy Ton photograph went viral [10], Virgil Abloh has largely been featured in fashion media. He has been an easy target to react to considering his social media presence. This translates into a prolific amount of information about him and his projects in fashion magazines and newspapers, their digital editions, and other social media channels such as blogs, Instagram, or Twitter.

Abloh’s coverage raises antagonistic reactions. On the one hand, he is praised as the revelation of today’s fashion by the streetwear world and the Black (fashion) community. On the other hand, he is considered an example of what is wrong with fashion today. Fashion designers, fashion writers, critics, insiders, and hardcore fans feel compelled to comment on Abloh’s work and role in the fashion industry, and only some independent fashion media have explored Abloh’s work and personality with in-depth research that goes further the mainstream.

As said before, he has been openly supported by colleagues, celebrities, and other artists, who have openly spoken about his talent and generosity toward them, thus participating in the reproduction of fashion as a closed circle of insiders [8]. In this sense, he is a comfortable figure to feature in traditional fashion media, who have covered every new project he is involved in by publishing in-depth reportages on him and his work.

Along the same lines, The Business of Fashion has taken Virgil as a case study and has named him one of BoF’s 500 as the “boundary-breaking designers setting an example for others to follow,” “the disruptor” [21]. That same year, 2018, he was also named one of *TIME* magazine’s 100 most influential people. With an entry written by Japanese artist and Abloh’s collaborator, Takashi Murakami, he recognized that “the foundation of his value, or branding, is humanity itself, not a superficial trick” [22].

Nevertheless, he has been submitted to criticism from the insiders of the fashion industry coming from the “activators”—as Raf Simons defined them and himself to comment on Virgil's lack of originality in an interview with GQ [23]. A similar backlash came from Walter Van Beirendonck, from Antwerp Six, who stated in *The New York Times*: “Copying is nothing new. It's part of fashion. But not like this (...) It's very clear that Virgil Abloh is not a designer (...) He has no language of his own, no vision” [24]. *Diet Prada*, “the Instagram site that acts as the self-appointed moral police of fashion,” has also fiercely spoken against his “uncredited” designs [25].

Abloh has used social media and independent magazines such as *032C* or *System* as platforms to “defend” himself and be able to approach his audience. When Abloh has been subjected to criticism, he has used it to delve into his discourse and reveal his intellectuality. It is his opportunity to validate his vision and work and to address issues such as authorship/(re)appropriation [26] or plagiarism [27].

James P. Scully, the celebrated casting director, has been an important figure in fashion for his advocacy on diversity. He recently published on his Instagram Stories the following statement as a response to Louis Vuitton's last digital fashion show: “Whilst this was an amazing video with a stupendously talented team of people I admire, these were not good clothes (. . .) Which led me to deduce that fashion has slipped into two schools at the moment. Clothes that are designed with integrity and clothes that are designed for Marketing purposes (. . .)” He then finishes it with: “That said, Virgil's Louis Vuitton bags are pretty kick-ass!” [28].

Certainly, these words feel very personal to Scully, they were published on his personal Instagram page, but they reveal the contradictory opinions toward Abloh's world. He is at the same time “the perfect Renaissance man,” following British *Vogue*'s Editor-in-chief Edward Enninful words, and the “represent[ation of] everything wrong about the fashion system now,” as Angelo Flaccavento, *System* fashion writer, said [29]. He is the “disruptor” [21] in Amy Vermeer's words, shaking the traditional notions and perceptions of the fashion industry [30]. But he is doing it from the inside, because being Louis Vuitton's creative director, he is no longer a “tourist” in the fashion industry—using his own terms.

5 Conclusions

As it has been proven throughout this paper, Virgil Abloh is a multidisciplinary designer whose work can only be understood in our contemporary context. He is also a great communicator and has a thorough understanding of brand communication and marketing strategies. Abloh himself has acknowledged that everything is a matter of branding: “Off-White is not a brand. It is an artistic project that expresses through clothing. Clothes are just a medium to create a new language” [31]. Fashion is therefore regarded as a language; consequently, this paper is an approach to Virgil Abloh's unique fashion language as appeared on social media, fashion magazines, and other platforms and recordings available online certifying that fashion communication nowadays transcends the traditional fashion media.

Virgil Abloh has used his voice to go beyond the fashion industry and has engaged with social and cultural issues of his time. For example, his discourse on race and his take outs on black culture have taken on a new meaning this past 2020 after the filmed killing of George Floyd and the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement. Virgil Abloh introduces social issues into the fashion industry agenda, which confirms his role as a contemporary phenomenon, as connoted in the introduction. In other words, he is a man of his time, our time, thus embodying the contemporary zeitgeist.

To conclude, this first approach to Virgil Abloh and his understanding of fashion and design highlights how important it is to study contemporary phenomena in fashion academia to merge fashion theory and practice. Virgil Abloh has his own vision of the world and has developed a distinctive language to speak and create about it. He and his work thus become an attractive subject of study for future research that aims to promote a deep understanding of contemporary fashion practices and contributes to the recognizance of fashion studies in academic fields.

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