Episode 1: The Body with Nick Cerioni

Transcript of the fifth episode of the podcast "Con Ferré, progetti e principi in dialogo" titled "The Body", with guest Nick Cerioni. MOOC "Unfolding Gianfranco Ferré", Polimi Open Knowledge, Politecnico di Milano.

"With Ferré, projects and principles in dialogue" is a podcast curated by the Gianfranco Ferré Research Centre with Paolo Ferrarini. In this series of conversations, we meet designers and practitioners from every field. With them, we talk about their projects, their challenges and their working methods, always starting from Gianfranco Ferré's design principles – namely body, matter, colour, detail, volume and movement. We will discover viewpoints, disciplines and applications that help us to understand more clearly Gianfranco Ferré's vision, his cultural legacy and the relevance of his thinking in all the different fields of contemporary design.

In a very famous lecture given to students at the Politecnico di Milano, Gianfranco Ferré defined the body as the first principle in his work. He covered and uncovered the body, dressed it and transformed it, clothing it in geometries that turn into movement. These are the starting points for our conversation with Nick Cerioni, celebrity stylist and creative director. Through his vision and his professional approach, we explore the contemporary body in the world of entertainment and beyond. Nick leads us to discover the role of the silhouette in constructing an image, amid cultural influences that range from American pop culture to the history of Italian television, all the way to Japanese visual and literary culture.

Paolo Ferrarini: Hi Nick, welcome to the podcast of the Gianfranco Ferré Research Centre – Digital Innovation for the Creative and Cultural Industries at the Politecnico di Milano.

Nick Cerioni: Hi Paolo, thank you so much for this wonderful invitation, it's always a pleasure.

PF: Today, with you, we'll be talking about one of the founding values of Gianfranco Ferré's creative process – the body. So let's dive straight in and focus on the theme. Nick, if I say "body and fashion", what comes to your mind? What do you see? What are the images that appear before your eyes?

NC: Well, as someone who still works in the world of fashion today, but who first and foremost has always been an enthusiast, what comes to mind are all those designers who have worked on the extremisation of the body's forms. So I think of Mugler, I think of McQueen, of Galliano with his exploration of the body – starting with his own brand but also at Dior, of course – right up to today, with his now iconic Margiela show. So I'm very fascinated – and Ferré himself, of course, is part of this – I'm very fascinated by those who have tried to think of the body almost as a malleable container, not just something to embellish, if you like – which perhaps is the main aim that fashion has given itself, not simply to dress the body but to decorate it – but also by those who have wanted to go in the opposite direction, almost making it deformed, monstrous, or angular, robotic. In any case, by those who have made it an object of study, almost as sculptors do, right? They can

decide what shape the body they are sculpting will have, and in the same way designers, I think, are magical to watch when they imagine the body of a muse, of a man, of a being that perhaps lives only in their imagination.

PF: So, it seems to me that you have a preference for that kind of fashion that shapes the body, rather than for the kind of fashion that simply follows the body.

NC: Well, you know, I obviously work in show business, so I think first and foremost in terms of the silhouette that has to stand out on screen, in videos and in photos. So it's clear that, for me, the designers who do highly impactful, theatrical work on the body are initially more interesting. On the other hand, I'm also very interested in those who enhance sensuality. I think of the legendary shows of Gianni Versace, but also of the work that Dolce & Gabbana have done on the female body. I like extremes, let's say. I'm less, shall we say, passionate about those who sit in the middle: those who simply want to dress the body for its primary function – to keep warm or to stay cool – or likewise those who don't really study a proper silhouette. For me, the silhouette is fashion's primary grammar; without the silhouette, fashion, in my view, cannot begin. Of course, there is a whole world to be built on top of that, but it's a bit like the foundations of the castle you then construct and, in my opinion, all the great names in fashion start precisely from a silhouette, from a sketch, from a drawing, from an idea that is foundational. So yes, I favour those who, let's say, push it to an extreme in some way.

PF: Nick, can you tell us what the key elements of your approach to styling are? Because it's very clear: over the years you've developed a discourse that is very strong and very precise. So what are the elements within which you move in your profession?

NC: Well, I always hope that, whenever possible, styling can be a container of messages, or at least that it can allow someone to breathe a certain atmosphere. I don't think it's always OK to get dressed purely as an end in itself. I always think that in important situations – such as the Sanremo Festival, a major performance on an important stage, but also the cover of an album or a book, or a film poster – you have to be highly impactful in terms of content as well. Today we live in an age in which we are bombarded with thousands of images a day, which did not happen in the past. Perhaps it began when the phenomenon of advertising exploded, but today we experience it every day in the world of social media, on the web, walking down the street, when we are waiting for the tram in front of these spectacular screens that now show one advert after another. We're a bit in Blade Runner, in our own way.
So I think that, since we are all used to this endless scrolling of images, the image that we try to create must always be one that makes you pause for a moment – even if only for a few seconds – but still makes you think, or makes you say: why am I seeing this? What does it mean? Why? Or, paradoxically, it might simply entertain, but entertain while still carrying a thought.
I'm in love with all those performers of the past who made thought the foundation of their image. I think of the great style icons: Madonna, Jackson, Bowie – the usual gods of the musical Olympus – who are gods precisely because they were extraordinary, almost extraterrestrial, in the way they conceived their art. That's where I'm interested in starting from. Then of course there are situations in which you have to do safe things, clean things and so on, but I always hope to have the opportunity to do things that can somehow leave a mark.

PF: Are there bodies that are easier to dress and bodies that are less easy to dress? Or is the variety of bodies and shapes not a key factor when there is a story to tell?

NC: Look, on the one hand I'd say that, as far as my own perception goes, there is no body that is simpler or easier, but there are personalities that are simpler, easier. On the other hand, though, it's undeniable – we can't bury our heads in the sand – that there is a system that doesn't make it easy to dress bodies that lie outside standard sizes, or rather that doesn't make it easy to dress bodies that don't fit into a given canon.
Let me give an example: I'll stay in Italy, I won't look abroad, because in some ways it's easier and in others it's harder to work here, right? Today we have a music scene in which Elodie exists and Big Mama exists. Elodie is the prototype, the canonical beauty of the fashion model: she is a beautiful woman with a body drawn by Milo Manara. In fact, she has also collaborated with Manara, precisely because she looks like one of his heroines. So of course that doesn't mean that she is easy to dress, but I imagine that whoever works with her doesn't struggle to find things that suit her very well.
Then we have Big Mama who, in my opinion, is not – I don't want to draw this contrast to say one is easy and the other difficult – because Big Mama, paradoxically, although the system can be hard to approach (I know her stylist very well, for example, because we recently worked together on a project in collaboration with some of the artists I follow) I imagine it's not easy to ask mainstream brands for an outfit for a girl who does not fit the sample size. At the same time, though, Big Mama embodies an oversize, almost cartoonish body, I don't quite know how to put it – almost utopian – but super sexy in its form.
In my opinion, what's really hard is the in-between; that is, everything between Big Mama and Elodie is complex, because fashion tends to have very precise, very clear aesthetic codes. So if you're a pseudo-model, fine, I'll draw you like this. If you're an oversize girl, fine, I'll draw you as I would draw Big Mama or Lizzo in the United States. It's the in-between that's difficult: so, for example, a girl who wears a size 40 but has a very generous bust, or a man who wears a 50 or 52 but is rather short and has a belly.
I think it's very difficult, visually, to make people look cool if they don't fit the standard shapes of the system's stylistic thinking. On the other hand, we clearly have to do it, because the variety of bodies that now fills the pages of magazines and the stages is wonderful, so it's essential.
From my relatively small experience in the worlds of fashion and entertainment, I find it very difficult to make the fashion system understand this, because brands are often afraid of dressing people who don't fit their aesthetic canon. They think such people are not in line with their philosophy, with their identity. But I believe that part of the major crisis in the fashion world has to do with precisely this: not being able to engage in a dialogue with the reality of facts, with the reality of the street.
To what extent does the "ordinary" public today – in inverted commas, with everything that "ordinary" might mean – manage, or simply want, to make the effort to understand the syllogisms on which fashion thrives? Perhaps those syllogisms are a bit anachronistic. If we had a more pop approach – I don't want to say "popular", because "popular" is also, stupidly, somewhat disparaging – but a more pop way of approaching ourselves, I think there could be more dialogue, including dialogue about the body, about what it means to be sensual, about what is beautiful and what is ugly. Because these are very absolutist concepts, aren't they? They divide things strongly, when in fact beauty and ugliness are highly subjective.

PF: Another key variable in your work is that of the static body and the body in motion. You work a lot on photographic sets – I'm thinking of album covers, magazine covers, promotional photo shoots for the artists you work with – but you also work a lot on the live dimension, whether it's concerts or music videos and so on. So what are the differences in your styling choices when you are facing a static body, as opposed to a performance?

NC: Look, in reality for me it's always a performance: the body is always in motion; the body is in motion because it has to be alive. I've never liked the world of… or rather, it's not true that I've never liked the world of publishing – I've loved it a lot – but I loved it when it was disruptive, when it told a story, and when you tell stories there is always movement. Even if you're static, you are still working with your mind. So for me the body is always in motion and, indeed, it's the movement of the body that brings fashion to life. For me there is no static fashion. I'm not moved by seeing a dress on a mannequin; I'm moved when I see it on a performer, when I see it on a person, because I think it is a kind of great sounding board connected by a jack to the essence of that person.
I like to think that, just as a guitar is amplified by a massive amp at a concert, so a garment can amplify who we really are. This is one of fashion's great powers, which is often forgotten – that it is in fact a very powerful vehicle of communication, infinitely powerful. Because, if you think about it, fashion speaks before we do when we enter a place; when an artist walks onto a stage, even when a politician stands before a large audience to give a speech, the first thing that happens is that you see how they are dressed. So it's the outfit that already says something to you. It can say: I am distant from you, or I am close to you, or I want to seduce you, or I want to inspire fear. In the history of dress, clothing has always served this purpose, and today more than ever it still serves this purpose. It speaks about us.

PF: Very often, in your work, you have also found yourself dealing with archives – archives that might be those of television costumes and, in some cases, even theatre costumes. You once told me that fashion doesn't often amuse you – in the sense that fashion understood as seasons, runway shows and so on, you find a bit repetitive, a bit boring – and so very often you draw instead on these marvellous reservoirs.
So do you find different representations of the body there? An example that comes to mind is when you worked with RAI costumes from the Eighties. Did you notice, for example, different body shapes? And we're not talking about very long ago – we're not talking about costumes from the Twenties or Thirties, but only a few decades ago. So were the bodies different?

NC: Yes, absolutely, that happens often. Firstly, because aesthetics change – I'm talking now about the world of traditional fashion – the aesthetics of the models, male and female. Every era has had its women and its men. So if, for example, in the Nineties the men on the catwalks were powerful, muscular men – I'm thinking of the world of Versace, Dolce & Gabbana, but also the double-breasted-suit men of Ferré – they were nonetheless athletic men. They were a bit like the Greek ideal, that's the kind of beauty they embodied. In the late Nineties, then in the 2000s and everything that came after, the male body almost moved closer to a feminine aesthetic, that of an emaciated woman – Kate Moss, who broke the idyll of the supermodels. So I'm thinking of the men Prada initially put on the catwalk, which were perhaps among the first to show this type of more effeminate, thinner man – almost young boys rather than men who inspired strength and power.
So yes, the body has changed. And in entertainment it has changed enormously. As you said, I found myself several years ago working with the legendary Luca Sabatelli, who was the greatest costume designer of Italian television in the Seventies, Eighties and also Nineties, and we liter-

ally went hunting for his creations. In that case, it was true – some were made for "Fantastico", a RAI show, but also for "Drive In", a show on the early Mediaset. And to our amazement – and he explained why – we noticed that the costumes worn by the dancers, which on TV had seemed so voluptuous, so full-figured, were actually tiny. He told us that the dancers who worked in television at a high level mostly came from classical ballet, because there was no specific professional training yet for television dance – the great phenomenon of televised dance was born in those years. So they hired dancers who had to be suited for classical ballet, meaning small, slender women who, even if they had shapes that were not ideal for the great theatre stages – perhaps too much bust or too round a bottom – were more harmonious on TV. So these costumes were really very small. And that is interesting: as you said, in the space of only a few decades, women have become something else. The dancers we are used to seeing on TV now are almost incredible athletes, with these chiselled bodies, statuesque, very tall, sometimes even taller than the men. So from an anthropological point of view it's fascinating to see how physical forms actually change so much in a short time.
In fact – we were talking about this only a few days ago – I went to select some shoes at a brand and they told me that now all the major brands have started producing high heels in sizes like 40, 41, 42, because today's women, the younger generations, often have very large shoe sizes, even if they are not necessarily very tall. Size 40 has almost become standard among young women, and some buy size 42. So even women's feet have changed. If you think about it, until at least five or six years ago, to find a size 42 heel you had to go to specialist shops.

PF: Nick, can you tell us a real-life example, a professional case in which you found yourself having to transform a body radically, perhaps at the request of the artist you were working with? Times when transformation was truly necessary and you managed to achieve it?

NC: That's a good question. In reality I've never done huge transformations, except on a narrative level. I'm thinking of Achille Lauro at Sanremo, where we played with this idea of freedom of the male body and female body at the same time. So yes, that was a major transformation, because Lauro came from the trap scene, which has its own aesthetic codes, but in fact Lauro, even before working with me, was already experimenting with women's clothing. Perhaps we just brought him somewhere slightly more elevated, more conceptual.
But I'm also thinking of the work we have done… I work – I don't know – I'm very drawn to that world because I come from there, from nightlife, from clubbing. So over the years I've worked a lot with drag queens. Working with drags is always fascinating because it is a genuine transformation that demands great skill and professionalism. I must say that, both on "Drag Race", where I had the opportunity to be a judge and then to work with Priscilla for one season as her stylist, and in doing the artistic direction for "Non Sono Una Signora", which was the first Italian prime-time television programme with drag queens as protagonists, it was all very interesting. We had guests from the entertainment world – heterosexual men, completely unsuspected – who put themselves to the test by transforming into drag queens. They thought they were coming along, putting on a wig and a pair of heels, and that was it. In reality they had six hours of make-up, costume fittings… and the incredible thing was that at a certain point they really dove into the character. When they finally looked at themselves in the mirror, they were excited, shocked – and then they became competitive with one another: "I want the best heels", "My wig is higher", "Why are my tights like this? I want them more…". Who is this speaking? What is going on?
But it's interesting, because transforming a body there is obviously taking things to an extreme, it's a game, it's entertainment. But we did it with the desire to show the mainstream audience that

the drag world is not just a world of transgression, as people tend to think – men who feel like dressing as women for a night, as perhaps the conservative public imagines, not accustomed to a certain kind of mental freedom – but that the drag world is made up of great performers, great professionals, and is very far from mocking femininity. On the contrary, it exalts it, idealises it – and that is a great form of freedom.
I like to think that fashion, even in that case – a fashion that comes from the club, from the street – should be a fashion that inspires the liberation of our bodies. And there, paradoxically, freedom comes from forcing the body into almost an armour, doesn't it? Because a drag outfit is like putting on a Roman centurion's armour: you have the corset, you have all the support tights – it's extremely restrictive on the body. But it makes you feel free, it makes you feel powerful, it makes you feel liberated from an idea of masculinity that oppresses you more than the tight corset you are wearing. And this, in my opinion, is fashion's great revelation.
I also think of the great women in the history of dress – the great queens. Elizabeth I wanted to express, through her appearance, the power she had to wield in a male world. So her hips became ever larger – on the one hand, to convey a sense of grandeur, but on the other, as a way of reaffirming her femininity, because wide hips were a symbol of prosperity and of being able to bear children. But it all became extreme: these huge skirts, the waist cinched so tightly that the shoulders seemed much broader, like men's – like the figures of knights – and then shaving her head and painting herself almost white, like a mask, because she had to instil a certain kind of fear. And so on. It was an outfit that was complex, uncomfortable, full of constraints, but at the same time made you feel free and powerful and respected.
That, to me, is almost a forerunner of what happened afterwards, when women appropriated typically male garments: suits, the power suit. People now say that a woman feels as strong as a man in a meeting because she dresses like him – and there's no issue with a man dressing like her. So everything is being turned upside down. It's a fascinating thing.

PF: Nick, I want to ask you one last question. I'd like you to tell us a bit about one of your great passions – comics, manga, anime, the whole visual culture of the Far East. Up to now we've always talked about real bodies; those are imaginary bodies, which do not exist. I'd like to understand what you draw from that culture in terms of bodies and whether you've ever turned any of your artists, any of your clients, into a manga character.

NC: Well, almost all of them, I have to say… no, I'm joking, but in a way yes. What I like about Japanese literature – because manga for them is fully-fledged literature – is, on the one hand, the emotional complexity they manage to express in their works, which perhaps they don't manage to express in words or in their everyday lives, because they are culturally very strict, aren't they? Strict in the sense of very composed. But in their literature there are all these nuances of thought and emotion. Even sexuality is very interesting in Japanese comics, because when it talks about sexuality, it does so with an incredible range of nuances.
And on the other hand, aesthetically, I love the iconic way in which they mix Western clothing, because basically, if you think about it, Japan approached our clothes practically the day before yesterday – in the nineteenth century Japan was still a feudal system, very few foreigners came in, and then we arrived from Europe, from the United States, with this whole set of visual codes, which they now mix in such a free, nonchalant way that they create wonderful hybrids. I can think of so many artists who have imagined amazing things.
This is not a comic, of course, but there is a great Japanese costume designer called Michiko Kit-

amura, who does the costumes for Takashi Miike's films. I absolutely adore her work because she creates incredible mix and match. In the film "Sukiyaki Western Django", which is an imaginary film in the Django series – you know there are loads of them – Miike, who is a good friend of Tarantino, made his Django before Tarantino did, and Tarantino himself appears in the film, because the two of them are big fans of the Italian Django saga. The costumes she created for that film are still, for me, among the most beautiful ever: she combines traditional Japanese clothing with Western wear. So you have people wearing incredible denim kimonos with huge cowboy hats; you have samurai entirely dressed in jeans. Visually, it's a beautiful film.
Then of course there is Eiko Ishioka, who – if I'm not mistaken – won an Oscar, and who created the costumes for "Bram Stoker's Dracula" and for many other films, including "The Cell" by Tarsem Singh. We're talking about an extraordinary costume designer.
And in manga, too, you see incredible things. I'm thinking of all the work in "Sailor Moon", of the work of CLAMP in "Tokyo Babylon": there are some amazing outfits and, again, you could have an in-depth discussion about the body. For example, Satoshi Kon, a wonderful director who made "Perfect Blue" and "Millennium Actress", always tells the stories of women who pass through very dreamlike phases, almost like LSD hallucinations. They pass through costumes, body shapes and particular conceptions of the body.
In fact, just yesterday I saw "The Substance", very late, and it reminded me so much of Satoshi Kon's work, because Satoshi Kon talked precisely about losing the sense of reality, about women who sacrifice themselves for fame. I'm thinking of "Perfect Blue", which is precisely about this, and that idea of a body that no longer has self-awareness is extraordinary.
But since you mentioned this, I've remembered… Yes, what I love about Japanese literature is very much this. And yes, I've drawn a lot of inspiration from it for my artists. Perhaps the most direct thing I've done inspired by a manga was at the start, when I began working with Måneskin and drew inspiration from a work I happened to be reading at the time, which led me to discover someone who would become a dear friend of mine, Eleonora Caruso, a writer and manga adaptor in Italy. The work is an incredible manga called "The Poem of Wind and Trees", a very raw story set in a nineteenth-century French boarding school, and that's where I found inspiration for the entire early image of Måneskin. It was many years ago, but for me… I've now completely absorbed this Japanese influence.
I grew up with the great anime: the world of uniforms in "The Rose of Versailles", the world of Japanese idols like Creamy, "Sailor Moon" itself, where all the villains… You know in "Sailor Moon" – and this is a nice anecdote that works very well for this podcast – the author of "Sailor Moon", Naoko Takeuchi, if I'm not mispronouncing it, has always been a great fashion enthusiast. All the big villains in "Sailor Moon", the really iconic ones, are dressed almost entirely in outfits taken straight from Mugler shows. Whereas the iconic dress of the princess that Sailor Moon embodies, Princess Serenity, is a Ferré dress.

PF: Oh, really!

NC: It's a Ferré dress, the dress with the capital, do you remember it?

PF: Of course, of course.

NC: And that is the dress of Sailor Moon's iconic princess, the one she becomes. Once she has taken on that form, she is Princess Serenity, wearing Ferré. So the ultimate heroine wears Ferré,

while the villains wear Mugler.
PF: On that note, I think we can wrap up, because that's the perfect conclusion.

NC: Exactly. It is, absolutely.

PF: Wonderful. Thank you, Nick, thank you for your time and thank you also for this wonderful gem.

"With Ferré, projects and principles in dialogue" is a podcast curated and produced by Paolo Ferrarini for the Gianfranco Ferré Research Centre. Full credits can be found in the synopsis of each episode.